

SLAYERS



16 *A CHANCE ENCOUNTER
IN ATESSA*

BY HAJIME KANZAKA
ILLUSTRATIONS BY RUI ARAIZUMI



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1: Shadows Circle the City of Smiths

Five loud bangs rang out. Then, once the commotion settled, I sat back down in my seat and took a sip of my still-warm tea.

“Ngh... hng...” On the floor before me lay one of the roughnecks I’d just decked. He was on his back, twitching, but managed to lift his head to look up at me. “The hell... do you think... you’re doing?”

“What am I doing?” It was an understandable question, but I blinked once, then replied, “Self-defense?”

“How...? I didn’t do... nothin’... to you...”

“Excuse me?” His utter lack of compunction brought a sigh from my lips. “You see a traveler enjoying his meal and use the old ‘haven’t seen you around here before’ excuse to surround him with four other guys and start badgering him. Then when a nearby delicate beauty calls you on your BS, you reach out to grab her. I’d say darn good and well that’s *something*.”

Stopping for a bite to eat, getting accosted by roughnecks, and being forced to pound them down after one thing led to another... It was pretty standard fare for me while on the road, to be honest. Needless to say, I didn’t enjoy it one bit.

The only silver lining was that, since the chaos started *before* the food arrived, my lunch hadn’t been compromised in the conflict.

“Nearby delicate beauty? Who the—” began my traveling companion, who was standing nearby, in an attempt to derail my narrative with filthy lies. I shot him a glance. Taking the hint, he quickly clammed up. “Ah, never mind.”

Moreover, my dude was talking like what had transpired was none of his business... but after I’d laid out the first hooligan, he’d taken out the rest of the irate band before they could rush me. See, because of my companion’s handsome face, long blond hair, and casual demeanor, some folks presume his conspicuous longsword and light mail are just a front. But the dude in question,

Gourry Gabriev, was truly remarkable with a blade. The roughnecks, whom he'd taken out in a flash without so much as drawing said blade, had undoubtedly learned the hard way that he was the real deal.

"Anyhoo." I turned my gaze back to the laid-out roughneck arguing with me. "If you don't wanna be in the business of losing fights, try not to pick them in the first place."

But alas, my sage advice just caused the man to dig in his heels. "We didn't pick a fight! We were just doing our job as the local security force!"

"Hmph. Is that what you call the neighborhood ruffians going around harassing people?"

"They really are local security," said a new voice. I turned to see who it was.

We were in a rather large lodging house called the Silver Leaf Inn on the city's main thoroughfare—more specifically, we were at the eatery on the first floor there. The place was probably packed with old drunkards at night, but with the afternoon sun streaming in through the open windows, the only souls there were me and Gourry, the five members of the so-called security force, a scattering of customers in nearby seats, and a bearded fortysomething man with friendly eyes behind the counter. The latter was who had spoken up.

"Really?" I asked him.

The old man nodded. "Really."

"See?!" the roughneck—er, local security force member—said smugly, still on his back.

But the old man didn't even spare him a glance as he replied, "Still, Randa, the fuss only started because you comported yourself like a hooligan."

"Ergh..." The man on the floor groaned in chagrin.

Aha. You see this from time to time—guys who get a little authority and take it as a license to be a dick to everyone around them. This Randa dude apparently fell into that category. I mean, surrounding our table with his little posse and opening with a "haven't seen you around here before" line? Talk about archetypal hooligan behavior.

The eatery's owner shifted his attention away from the despondent Randa. "Now, you two seem to be quite skilled," he said to Gourry and me. "And I assume the young lady there is a sorcerer?"

"Well, y'know..." I responded noncommittally. I just *knew* he was gonna try to wrangle me into some pain-in-the-ass hired job.

"I was wondering if you might be willing to stay here for a while as mercenaries and help protect the city from bandits."

Yep, called it!

Gourry was dressed like your typical swordsman, while I wore a long cape, a black bandanna, and jeweled accessories. In spite of the shortsword on my hip, I was *clearly* a sorcerer. Plus, given the fact we'd just laid out five guys, we were obviously strong. It was perfectly natural to presume we were a mercenary duo.

And, yeah, okay. Gourry and I *did* have a history of taking on work in our travels, but we weren't hurting for funds at the moment, so I wasn't thrilled about the idea of a side quest. Yet before either Gourry or I could respond...

"Wait a minute, Master MacLyle!" Randa objected. "We don't need their help! We're—"

"Randa," MacLyle said. His tone was quiet, but it shut Randa up immediately. "Could you please pipe down?"

"S-S-S-Sorry..." he replied apologetically, trailing off.

I was surprised to see the roughneck—er, local security guy—so cowed. Just who *was* this MacLyle guy?

"To tell you the truth, our town has been plagued by bandits of late," MacLyle began before I could even ask.

Oh... that's right.

I was reminded that I'd sensed someone watching us as Gourry and I entered the city. They hadn't seemed hostile, so I'd just pretended not to notice. Could that have been the bandits MacLyle was referring to? Except their presences—aura, whatever you'd call it—hadn't *felt* particularly bandity...

"It's been weeks of nasty business. Goods en route to nearby towns stolen,

workshops and mines sabotaged... We rustled up a crew to take care of the problem, but they don't seem to be making any progress."

"What about soldiers?" Gourry asked.

"There aren't usually any stationed here in town," I answered, taking a nearby seat now that it seemed the trouble had passed. "Though a few might stop by."

"Why not?"

"Various reasons."

"Like what?"

"Er..." I didn't want to say "don't ask," but I also had doubts he'd really understand even if I spelled it all out for him. "As you saw when we arrived here in Atessa, the city's smack dab in the middle of a buncha woods. It's known as the Celcelas Forest, and it stretches from the Kingdom of Zephilia to the Holy Kingdom of Saillune, with breaks here and there where you can mine high-quality gold. So with both lumber and mineral resources aplenty, Atessa developed as a hot spot for smithing, but... Hey! Don't fall asleep in the middle of my explanation!"

Bang! I gave Gourry a swift chop to the head.

"Mmah?" He looked up suddenly and craned his neck around.

"How are you not listening? *You're* the one who asked!"

"Oh, no, I was listening. I heard the whole thing. There's stuff going on in town, right?"

"Liar! I wasn't even finished! And if 'stuff going on' is enough of an explanation for you, don't bother asking for the details!"

Ah, I knew that'd be a waste of time! After screaming my heart out, I slumped over on the table, and...

"We produce a lot of weapons and armor in this city, you see," MacLyle continued. "If either kingdom set up a garrison here, the other might see it as a prelude to war. So to prevent that, neither has soldiers officially stationed in Atessa. We run our own security locally."

“Ah, I see.” Gourry nodded in understanding, then looked over at me. “That would’ve been a much simpler explanation.”

“You spaced out before I got to that part!”

“Well, if I may...” MacLyle reinserted himself into the conversation. “I said they were bandits, but they don’t seem to be any ordinary brigands. Our local task force can’t track down their hideout, and the offenders seem more interested in petty spite than money. In that sense, perhaps I should call them raiders instead. I was hoping you could offer some new insight into the situation.”

“I see...” I nodded vaguely in response.

To be honest, Gourry and I weren’t strapped for coin, and this job sounded like it was shaping up to be a real pain. It would’ve been one thing if it was just a couple days’ bodyguard work, or just going to the baddies’ hideout to give it the ol’ kaboom. But a vague objective like “do something about a band of thugs we haven’t even tracked down” was the kind of work that could become a huge time sink.

Assuming I *did* take the job... If the bandits made a straight charge at the village and I wiped ’em out with a flashy spell, that’d put a pretty quick end to things. But on the other hand, if the raiders had already abandoned Atessa and gone elsewhere, I could end up waiting around forever for nothing.

Not that I had anywhere special to be, mind you. I was simply out on a rambling journey after my big sis back home told me to go out and see the world. I’d seen more than my share at this point, however, so I’d decided it might be time to pack it up. Thus, me and Gourry—who I’d picked up along the way—were currently headed for my hometown, Zephyr City, capital of the Kingdom of Zephilia. So it wasn’t like it’d kill me to get held up here for a few days, but... I didn’t really want to get stuck waiting indefinitely for a raid that might never come.

Atessa was also part of Zephilia, though, and I did feel a little obliged to my countrymen, so I was hesitant to just turn them down. That said, I had a feeling the locals could probably handle this well enough even without me and Gourry getting involved...

“Are you suggesting that I’m incompetent?” came a new voice steeped in naked anger.

The woman who rose slowly to her feet was a random customer sitting some seats away—or so she’d appeared to be until now. She was dressed in a brown outfit with pants that looked easy to move in, and she wore a gray pageboy cap low on her head. The ensemble was rather mundane at a glance, but she had hair like spun gold and a face so lovely that it would make any man do a double take. She looked about twenty or so—or, she would have if she were human. Her true identity was betrayed by the large pointed ears poking out from underneath her hat.

Elves were beings who lived in harmony with nature, with longer lifespans and greater magical power than humans. I’d had a few dealings with them in the past. I’d even fought alongside one against a mutual enemy. They generally didn’t get involved in human affairs, but this woman’s words indicated she was in the city’s employ.

“Oh, no, of course not. We’re happy to leave the forest to you, Mistress Alaina,” MacLyle assured her.

His words caused the elf girl, Alaina, to purple with anger. “Then why are you trying to hire these people?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? Having an outside perspective will give us more options. You know the forests, and these two seem to have experience with such affairs.”

“Experience? *These* two?” Alaina narrowed her eyes at us as she spat out the words. “They look more like children playing sword-and-sorcery dress-up to me!”

Children...?

“Hey!” I shouted. Obviously, I couldn’t let that one slide. “Children? Dress-up? You can whine to the old man or bad-mouth Gourry all you like, but you’d better not drag me into it!”

“What a terrible thing to declare... and so proudly,” Gourry whispered in disbelief. I ignored him.

Alaina didn’t even look at me as I addressed her. She simply paled and strode

forward swiftly. I rose from my chair, expecting trouble, but she wasn't heading toward us; she was heading for the man behind the counter, to whom she immediately began whispering.

He listened for a while, then turned to us. "She says, 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way.'"

"...Huh?" I scowled in noncomprehension.

MacLyle smiled with a wince. "Well, Mistress Alaina has a great deal of pride, but it's tempered by extreme social anxiety."

"Sounds annoying!" At least I knew the type! "Is this one of those things where she's nervous about working with us because her social anxiety means she won't be able to talk stuff through with us?"



At that, Alaina leaned in and spoke quietly to MacLyle a while longer, sometimes shaking and sometimes nodding her head. At last, MacLyle turned to us and said, “She denies it in no uncertain terms.”

“I’m so right!”

Great, so Atesa was in the hands of a “security force” of hooligans and a proud-yet-introverted elf... What a mess.

As I was genuinely starting to get worried, MacLyle spoke up again. “Well, I know you’re just passing through, and I wouldn’t want to keep you here for too long. How about this? We’ll contract you for ten days at first. If you can finish things in that time frame or at least make serious progress, we’ll throw in a bonus. If ten days pass and nothing’s looking any closer to resolution, we can renegotiate then.”

Alaina seemed to be desperately arguing with him about something as he spoke, but MacLyle didn’t bat an eye.

Hmm. This little arrangement seemed designed so he could stiff me if nothing happened, but it had the benefit of not tying me down for an extended period of time. That being the case... I gave a little nod to Gourry and then approached MacLyle.

“Okay. Under those conditions, let’s give it a try for ten days.” I extended a hand over the counter.

The old man reached out to shake it. “Thank you very much. Oh, and let me introduce myself. My name’s Gene MacLyle. I’m the owner of the Silver Leaf and the leader of the local task force.”

Aha. That’s why he had Randa shaking in his boots...

“I’m Gourry,” my companion said bluntly.

“And I’m Lina. Lina Inverse. A sorcerer, as you surmised.”

Following the introductions, we got right down to business—negotiating our fee!

The city was surrounded by greenery. Birdsong drifted by on the wind, and

the sounds of life were rich all around us. But if I turned my gaze just a little, I could see a rock wall taller than a person running around the whole town.

Things were peaceful right now, but Zephilia and Saillune had locked horns over Atessa a long time ago. The sturdy rock wall encircling the city was a relic of the conflict. Of course, it was also useful for keeping out the bears and boars of the forest, not to mention the occasional goblin gaggle that came sniffing around. (This was all stuff MacLyle had told me earlier, by the way.)

Gourry and I were currently walking through the roadless forest, but we weren't there to sightsee. We were trying to get the lay of the land. Though we were in the woods, there wasn't much underbrush to impede our movement.

"Say..." I began as I walked along—obviously, to Gourry who was walking beside me. "Remember how someone was watching us when we first came to town?"

"Yeah, I remember sensing someone. I didn't pick up any malice, though. And I figured you knew and were ignoring them, which is why I didn't say anything."

As I'd suspected, Gourry had sensed them too. "They didn't strike you as bandits, did they?"

"Yeah, not really," Gourry agreed.

Now, I'm sure some of you are wondering, "How could you possibly know that based on something as nebulous as someone's *presence*?" But what can I say? You can just tell. Granted, sometimes I imagine things, but in this case, Gourry was in agreement. I had a feeling I was on the money.

"Or could it be a different entity from the people causing trouble in town? Seems unlikely, of course, but... hmm..." I muttered to myself.

Gourry spoke up in mild surprise. "Unusual to see you so serious. I'd expect you to be going on about how you can't wait to blow the bandits up."

"I mean, sure, that's definitely where this is going in the end. But if they were just your average bandits, the locals would've been able to clear this up themselves. The fact that they *haven't* tells me these bandits have some brain and skill going for them. And..."

“And?” Gourry prompted me as I paused.

I didn’t want to admit it, but there was no arguing with cold, hard facts. “I’ve got a lot fewer spells at my disposal than before.”

That comment led Gourry to look upward in thought, but before he could open his mouth...

“Let me warn you!” I interrupted him. “It’s *not* because of my physical condition! It’s just that I lost my magic-amplifying talismans in the last battle, and that’s done a number on my repertoire!”

“Oh yeah?” Gourry said casually.

Yup, without those talismans, I couldn’t use my old void blade spell. And as for the spell that let darkness consume a given area... I could technically use it if I wanted to, but bad things would happen if I lost control. Let’s just say I didn’t care to test that out. And going into a situation like I *could* still pull those spells out if I really had to was pretty damned foolhardy, so to put the kibosh on that, I’d decided just to act like they were off the table. Saying it out loud was less about explaining things to Gourry and more about reminding myself.

Of course, it was also entirely possible the local security force was just *that* crappy. We could indeed be dealing with ordinary bandits that would fold like a cheap towel the moment we found ’em. I wasn’t about to bet on that, though.

“At any rate, we need clues as to their whereabouts... and I’m not seeing any here,” I said.

In this mountainous area with nothing but animal trails for paths, you could find footprints and broken branches that indicated people had been through the area—too many, in fact. Townsfolk came out to collect firewood, the security force did patrols... Even if the raiders were around, it was impossible to tell which tracks were theirs.

“Clues, huh?” Gourry thought for a minute. “Why don’t we just ask?”

“Ask who?”

“Oh, what’s-her-name. You know. *Her*,” he said and pointed casually. I followed his finger and saw a figure observing us from a tree branch a ways

away.

“Alaina?”

At my unexpected call, a twitch ran through her body and she quickly ducked behind the tree trunk. It wasn't a particularly large tree, so despite her slender frame, she couldn't hide from us completely.

“Have you been following us this whole time?” I asked.

She didn't respond.

I have to confess... I hadn't detected her presence at all until now. Even granting that she exuded no hostility toward us, that was surprising. I knew that elves lived in harmony with nature, but I never knew they could blend in with the forest to this degree.

“Did you want us for something?” Gourry asked.

Alaina remained silent.

In that case...

“Well, you wouldn't be following us if you *didn't* want something. I know you're not happy that Master MacLyle asked for our help... but I sure hope you're not planning to kill us in the wilderness to cut us out of the picture.”

In response to my intentionally provocative statement, she silently dropped down from the branches. Even though there wasn't much underbrush around, to land from that height without making a sound was truly impressive.

With her eyes fixed solidly on us, she pulled something small from her pocket, placed it on the ground, and pointed at it. Then she plucked up one of the two coiled whips mounted on either hip (she hadn't been wearing those in the eatery) and unfurled it, snagging the branch of a tree behind her with a lazy wave-like motion. Then she kicked off the ground, pulled, and—drawn by the whip—landed lithely atop a new branch. The entire thing was executed with unbelievable quietness. I wouldn't say it was *soundless*, exactly, but if I hadn't been watching, I wouldn't have been able to distinguish it from the general sounds of the forest.

I don't know what she's up to, but...

Keeping my eyes glued on Alaina, I walked over and picked up what she'd left on the ground. It was about the size of a fist and wrapped in some kind of paper. The paper was thinner than parchment, presumably made from some plant or other. I opened it up and found a small scrap of wood inside akin to a simple paperweight. The paper wrapper was scrawled with ink: "I didn't know how to approach you."

"So annoying!!!" I found myself shouting. I glared up at her, causing her to duck behind a tree again. "I get that you're anxious, but can you at least make an *effort* to talk like a normal person?"

At this, she pulled something else from the pocket of her high-collared jacket and tossed it my way. It was another small parcel. I opened it up. The wrapper this time read: "When I get nervous, I can't get my voice above a whisper."

"..."

The fact that she'd produced these puppies straight from her pockets told me they weren't spur of the moment. She'd actually drawn up a bunch of notes in anticipation of questions she expected to receive. Talk about dedication to a gimmick!

"Argh..." I mussed up my hair in frustration. "Okay, Alaina! I'll ask, and you answer. For a yes, give me a thumbs-up. For a no, wave your hands. If you can't answer either way, palms out in a 'stop' sign. How does that sound?"

A thumbs-up—in other words, a yes—poked out from behind the tree trunk.

Excellent. But still annoying!

I was already feeling exhausted by this point, but instead of admitting it, I pressed on. "So the skinny is that you followed us because you have something to say, but you don't know how to break the ice, so you've just kept mum all this time?"

Another thumbs-up.

"Now, as for what it is you wanted to tell us..."

Let's see... How do I phrase this as a yes-or-no question? As I was mulling that over, Alaina once again retrieved something from her pocket and tossed it to

me. This was a bigger parcel than before.

I opened it and found... a hand-drawn map? It featured a large asymmetrical circle that looked like Atessa, with lines that looked like the roads to Zephilia, Saillune, and Kalmaart. On the opposite side of the big circle from the roads were four smaller circles. There were also small Xs strewn about, primarily concentrated either along the lines or between the big and small circles.

“Is this for us?”

Another thumbs-up from behind the tree.

“So the big circle is the city. The small circles are mines. And the Xs are points where attacks happened. Is that correct?”

Another thumbs-up.

“Thanks! But why give us this map?” Back at the restaurant, she’d made it sound like she didn’t want us involved. “Well, I guess you can’t answer that one with a yes or a no. In that case...”

As I was pondering what to ask next, there came a commotion among the birds. Alaina reacted immediately. She peered into the forest, took a whip in each hand, wrapped one around the trunk of a tree in the direction she was looking, and began swinging from tree to tree in that fashion.

“Something’s happening,” Gourry said. He immediately started to take off running, but...

“Wait!” I called out.

Alaina was moving deeper into the woods far faster than we could on foot. Given her direction, she was probably headed to one of the mines. I could only assume she’d determined something was going on there based on the sound of the birds, but...

“This way!” I began to run in the opposite direction.

Gourry, right behind me, asked, “Why this way?!”

“Instinct!” I replied. It would’ve been too much trouble to explain, but there *was* a rationale behind it.

Basically, assuming it was the raiders who'd just struck the mine, it was unlikely we would cross paths with them if we made a beeline to the scene. They'd managed to elude the local guard all this time, after all. So instead, Gourry and I were heading back to where we'd sensed someone watching us when we first hit the city.

Given the timing, it seemed likely that the presence we'd sensed had been the raiders on the way to mess with the mine, who had just happened to spot us on the way. Which meant there was a good chance they'd take the same route back.

Using my swift-flight spell would've sped things up, but maneuvering in the forest was difficult. There was a nonzero risk of slamming into a tree. And going up over the canopy would've only slowed us down and exposed us to the enemy. So, with little other choice, Gourry and I were left running through the woods. And after a while of that...

"Lina," Gourry said. "They're here."

I slowed down and looked in the direction Gourry was staring. The sunlight filtering through the trees dappled the ground covered in moss and grass, but it made the darkness of the forest beyond seem all the more impenetrable. I couldn't make out a humanoid form, and what I felt wasn't quite pronounced enough to be called a presence, but I did have the palpable sense something was off. More importantly... If Gourry said that someone was there, they definitely were.

We both stopped in place. "Heya! I think we've met before," I called out, raising my voice.

The atmosphere changed. Whoever was near probably hadn't realized we'd sensed them before, and they probably didn't think we'd sensed them now.

"I know you're no run-of-the-mill bandits! But since you keep going after Atessa... I bet you're really after *that*, aren't you?"

And by "*that*," I obviously meant... something I'd completely made up! I was trying to sound smart about it, but I actually hadn't the faintest clue what they were after.

Nevertheless, my claim left the opposing party with three possibilities to think over. One, I was bluffing. Two, I really knew what they were after. Three, I knew something they *didn't* know and had incorrectly assumed it was their objective.

If they went for Option One, they were better off ignoring me. If they went for Option Two, they were still safe to ignore me. But if they went for Option Three... Well, who knew what might happen then?

"What are you talking about?" came a man's voice, unable to discount the possibility of Option Three.

Yes! Sucker! There was a stirring in the dark forest, and five humanoid silhouettes appeared from within.

Aha... No wonder we couldn't see them. They were dressed in dull green tunics and pants, fastened here and there with sand-colored string. Their faces were also wrapped in similarly colored cloth, revealing only their eyes. They showed no skin—even the exposed area around their eyes had been thoroughly stained with grass extract and mud. With camouflage like that, so long as they stood still among the trees, you'd never spot them even from fairly close by. They blended in so well with the foliage that I couldn't identify their ages or sexes. I couldn't even be entirely sure there were only five of them.

"What do you know?" asked the one farthest to the right—the same one who'd addressed me before. The voice suggested male, but I couldn't be sure if it was his real voice or put-on.

"We're on the same page, buddy," I said.

"Talk."

"Not sure that's the best strategy for getting info out of someone. Maybe if you bow, hand over a hundred gold, and ask nicely—"

My snark was interrupted by almost a dozen Flare Arrows! They'd appeared from the outstretched palm of the leftmost figure, who must have used our talky time to chant the spell. It was an attack spell, of course—one that let you conjure and fire multiple flaming bolts. The exact number was determined by the skill of the caster.

Gourry and I quickly leaped to each side! *Ba-bwoosh!* The arrows struck the

ground in a flurry.



Are they trying to separate us?! Over the tumult, I could hear the sound of steel against steel. Gourry was apparently crossing swords with someone. *In that case...*

Before I could move, I saw a flash of a blade myself. I leaped back, put a hand to the sword on my belt, and quietly began a chant. I could barely make out the attacker through the smoke. All I could really see was a faint light coming from the blade in their hand. I drew my shortsword, blocked the blow, and evaded away. Soon, I completed my spell and...

Suddenly, I felt a familiar sensation. *Isn't this...*

I aborted the spell I was chanting, turned around, and started chanting a new one as I ran. I was trying to go full tilt, but my opponent caught up with me immediately. He struck out with a knee, but I leaped back to dodge it.

With a tree to my back, my opponent and I glared at each other awhile. Then I charged with all my might, unleashing my spell at my assailant! “Lighting!”

There was a brief flash of white in the thin forest. Normally all the spell did was provide light, but I’d made a few adjustments to give it maximum brightness in exchange for minimal duration. Taking it square in the face could blind you for some time.

I thought my opponent had run right into the spell, but if my hunch was right, it probably wouldn’t make a difference. I started chanting my next spell while running.

Zing! There was a tiny whistling sound on the wind, and I came to a dead halt.

My shadow trailing behind me on the sun-dappled ground was impaled with a small knife. I knew this trick. Shadow Snap was a spell to bind a target’s movements from the astral plane. Being able to pin someone in their tracks might *sound* powerful, but it wasn’t too effective against anyone who knew how to counter it—like I did!

“Lighting!” Using the same spell as before to conjure up a ball of light, I freed my shadow from the binding. And just as I turned to face my opponent...

Fweeeee! A whistle echoed through the forest.

Apparently they had a lookout who'd called them off. Hearing the signal, the men around me immediately turned and ran deeper into the green. Even the guys tangling with Gourry began to withdraw.

"Should we go after them?" he asked from some distance away.

"Let's not," I said, joining back up with him. This wasn't any ordinary bandit gang. They knew the terrain, and we *didn't* know their numbers. Pursuing under these conditions was a bad idea. "But I wonder why they retreated so suddenly..."

When I looked around, the answer became clear. Two men unlike the ranger bandits had appeared from the side of the forest nearer to the road. They wore fine silver armor that sparkled in the sunlight through the trees like fish flitting past the surface of the water. They were a matched pair, equipment-wise, suggesting they were probably soldiers.

"Who are you people?! Who were you fighting?" one of them demanded as he caught sight of us.

Aha...

They'd most likely been passing nearby and come to investigate when they heard the sounds of battle. The bandits—rather, the raiders—had sensed their approach and retreated.

"We were hired as mercenaries!" I held up my hands as I spoke to show that I meant them no harm. Gourry also sheathed his sword. "We ran into some raiders and got into a skirmish! But they turned tail when you arrived! You can confirm our story in Atesa yourselves!"

The soldiers looked at each other, then exchanged some hushed words. Then at last, they said, "Very well! Will you accompany us to the city?"

"Sure thing! Can I put my hands down now?"

"If you like... but don't try anything," said the cautious soldier.

"I won't," I replied breezily.

The two soldiers then escorted me and Gourry out of the woods and back to the main road.

“Ohh?!” I exclaimed.

There were a few dozen others dressed in the same armor as the soldiers. And, at the center of their neat ranks stood three fancy horse-drawn carriages and two equally well-made wagons. It was a bigger force than I’d expected.

And I gotta wonder...

I raised my voice a little to ask Soldier No. 1, “Hey, are you guys bigwigs?!”

“We’ll check your credentials first, then talk,” he responded.

But just then, one of the small carriage windows opened and a familiar face emerged...

“Lina! Master Gourry! I thought I recognized those voices!”

“Hey, been a while!”

“Yeah! It sure has!”

Soldier No. 1 blinked in surprise at our exchange.

The carriage door opened wide, and a girl dressed in white vestments—

“Stop, stop! Don’t make trouble for your guards! We can talk when we get back to town, Lady Amelia!” I called, trying to prevent her from busting out of her carriage.

She simply responded, “Just Amelia is fine! See you later, then, Lina!” And with that, she pulled back inside.

The soldiers around us all looked stunned. At last, Soldier No. 1 turned back to me, his armor clinking awkwardly. “It seems that you... er, that you’re an acquaintance of our princess, miss?”

“You could say that,” I replied with a wink.

The girl in the carriage was Amelia Wil Tesla Saillune. Given her name, you can probably guess that she was part of Saillune’s royal family. Gourry and I had traveled with her for a while some time back.

And in the event you’re wondering if we were her escorts, the answer is no. Amelia was a little younger than me and still had a bit of a childish air about her, but she knew shamanistic magic and white magic and she was a crackerjack

bare-knuckle fighter. She'd joined us as an equal in battle. After a real rollercoaster of adventures together, we'd parted ways when she had to return to Saillune.

During one of the aforementioned adventures, Gourry and I made the acquaintance of quite a few members of the Saillune royal family. I'd recognized the nation's soldiers by the crests on their armor and, given how the group was acting, correctly guessed that the carriage contained a VIP. I had an inkling it might be someone I knew, which was why I'd spoken up so loudly. But I'd never expected it to be Amelia herself!

And so me, Gourry, Amelia, and the Saillune brigade headed back to town.

Atessa, the city of smiths...

I'd stopped here with my mom while traveling once long ago, and I knew the general history of the city. This blacksmithing mecca, built on both the big forest and the local mines, had once been the subject of a territorial dispute between Zephilia and Saillune. At that time, the city had had a lord and a considerable guard, but now that the kingdoms had made nice, any military presence was kept to a bare minimum and security was mainly handled by locals. The lord had also been transferred to another domain, and the town now had a mayor to represent it. (Though, apparently, the mayor was a relative of the former lord.)

Of course, that didn't mean there were *no* soldiers in Atessa. The mansion of the former lord was now used as a guesthouse, and there were about twenty Zephilian soldiers posted there under the pretense of "administration." Two of them greeted us at the city entrance, then escorted Amelia and the Saillune group (plus me and Gourry) to the mansion.

Now, I call it a mansion, but it had clearly been designed to act as a fortress if need be. It was made of sturdy rock, and bare in its decoration.

When we entered the front gate, we found about a dozen people—seemingly local bigwigs—among the soldiers, all standing in front of the front door in a neat row. One of said bigwigs was MacLyle in a dress uniform. When he saw us, his eyebrows rose a bit, but he was in no position to say anything.

As all assembled stood at attention, an attendant placed an unnecessarily ornamental stepping stool at the foot of the carriage, and the finely decorated door opened. The person who exited was none other than...



A gasp of astonishment came from the crowd.

She wore a pure white dress decorated with gold thread and lace, and her simple ceremonial silver tiara was striking against her black hair. Obviously, she'd worn traveling clothes when we adventured together, but when she dressed like this, you could tell she was an honest-to-goodness princess. She looked like she'd gotten a little taller since last I saw her too.

As she stepped down onto the flagstone entrance path, she turned to face the bigwigs and lifted the hem of her skirt in a curtsy. "I am honored to meet you, people of Atessa. I am Amelia Wil Tesla Saillune, special envoy from Saillune. I apologize for imposing on you, even for this brief time."

Following Amelia's introduction, the mayor of Atessa stepped forward. After a long and self-aggrandizing speech, he said, "I hope you'll enjoy your stay in our guesthouse after your long journey. I'll show you around if you wish, but... ah..." He cast a glance to me and Gourry. "Might I ask who those two are? They don't appear to be part of your retinue..."

"They're my friends," Amelia said with a smile. "We happened to run into each other in the forest. I hear they're helping out the local security forces. I have a great deal to discuss with them, so would you mind if I borrow them for a bit?"

At this, the mayor said, "Yes, certainly. Go right ahead."

After all, what else could he say?

After that, Amelia and her retinue were assigned accommodations, and the intervening downtime before the night's banquet was all we were allotted to catch up with her.

"The truth is, I came to Zephilia as a special envoy to deliver a message—and it concerns you two," she said, sipping her aromatic tea and letting out a sigh.

"Um... is it okay to talk about that here?" I asked, reflexively keeping my voice down.

Amelia had been given a comparatively large room. Naturally, since this was a

guesthouse, it was finely decorated with a thick carpet, tapestries on the walls, large tables and desks, and a beautiful canopy bed in the back... Though they did all look a little on the old side.

The table where Amelia, Gourry, and I sat had been set with tea for three, served by the guesthouse's maid. She stood nearby, along with six soldiers accompanying Amelia—one in each corner and two at the door. Obviously, if Amelia explained her business here, they'd all overhear it. I was wondering if that was okay, but...

"Oh, no worries," she declared with a smile. "The more people who know, the better. The kingdom wishes to share this information far and wide... for it concerns the existence of high-ranked demons."

"High-ranked demons?" I whispered.

I'm sure I don't need to remind you, but demons were monsters that fed off the negative emotions of living beings and sought to destroy the world. Lesser demons and brass demons were common fare, but there were stories of higher-ranked demons—namely an entity known as the Dark Lord (who'd been split into seven parts according to legend) and his five lieutenants, Hellmaster, Chaos Dragon, Dynast, Greater Beast, and Deep Sea.

And... Well, I guess I should just say it outright. Me, Gourry, Amelia, and another friend of ours had actually destroyed one of said lieutenants: Hellmaster Fibrizo.

Yeah, I know. I'm perfectly aware. Make a claim like that, and everyone'll think you're running a scam.

Some sorcerers didn't even believe the Dark Lord and his lieutenants were real. They used spells that invoked the demons' names, but rather than calling upon the beings themselves, they interpreted the practice as channeling a more nebulous source of power—or perhaps the laws of nature themselves. The idea that we'd met a lieutenant of the Dark Lord and actually destroyed him... I couldn't blame anyone for doubting that.

In fact, when I'd reported it to the sorcerers' council myself, I'd expected to be met with disbelief. And the reaction I'd been met with was... Yeah, exactly that. Whole lotta raised eyebrows. The questions I got were less "is that true?"

and more “is she bragging, grifting, or crazy?”

Their perturbation was understandable, of course. I would’ve felt the same way in their position. But I swear it really happened!

“This is about... Hellmaster, right?” I asked Amelia. “You think anyone’ll believe you?”

“It’s important that people know high-level demons really exist, and that one of them has been destroyed,” she replied. “But most won’t believe it based on my word alone, so I explained things at home and asked the sorcerers’ council to prove it.”

“Prove it? How?”

“They verified that spells which call upon Hellmaster no longer work. That should be proof enough that the power source known as Hellmaster is no longer accessible. Granted, it doesn’t prove that high-ranked demons are independent beings that take human form, much less that one of them was destroyed by a human. But no one can dismiss the idea out of hand anymore. Our future depends on as many people as possible knowing what threats exist in this world and what form they take, so I’m going around to various kingdoms to present our findings. But because the testing took quite a bit of time, I’m only getting around to it now...” Amelia then smiled and said, “I was worried that it might take so long that you guys had already defeated another high-ranking demon in the meantime, you know? Ahaha...”

“Ahahahaha,” I laughed hoarsely.

“Ahahahaha.” Amelia laughed along with me. Then, still smiling, she said, “I see you no longer have your talismans, Lina... It made me think you might have run into some kind of trouble. And I think your laugh just now confirmed it.”

Erk! Curse your powers of observation, Amelia! You really have grown!

There was no way I could play dumb after that. I scratched the back of my head and confessed, “Yep, sure did!”

“Take this seriously!” she shouted out for some reason, and I felt a little abashed.

“Hey, calm down, Amelia. It’s not like I went out and picked a fight on purpose. Anyway, this isn’t like the Hellmaster thing where it renders particular spells unusable, so it shouldn’t have any effect on your message. Don’t worry.”

She gazed at me in silence for a while, then gave me a strained smile. “So, Lina, what exactly did you do?”

I averted my eyes. “Ah, well... We dealt Dynast Graushera a pretty heavy blow and defeated another avatar of the Dark Lord...”

I heard a dull thud, and when I turned to look, I found the princess slumped over the table.

“Hey! A-Are you okay, Amelia?!”

“Well... I think...” She sat up unsteadily and pressed her fingers to her temples. “I’m going to pretend I never heard that... Okay, I can’t do that, but it sounds like a long story, so we’ll save it for later. There’s something else I want to confirm first. Who were you fighting in the forest?”

“Hmm... To be honest, we only just took on the job today. Apparently some weird raiders have been attacking Atessa for a while, causing all kinds of mayhem.”

“Raiders?” Amelia parroted dubiously.

“The guy who hired us called them bandits, but...”

“They can’t be,” she said easily, her expression unchanging.

“What makes you think so?”

“Well, obviously...” Amelia responded in surprise. “If there had been any fatalities, my soldiers would have brought them in or reported it. The fact that they didn’t tells me there were no such casualties, and for those people to have escaped a fight with you two alive tells me that they cannot be mere bandits.”

Her logic was sound. I smiled awkwardly and shrugged a little. “Well, we’re in agreement there, but...” I glanced over at Gourry. “What did you think of the guys we fought in the forest?”

“Hmm...” Gourry sipped his tea as he thought. “Boring fashion sense.”

“I’m not asking about their clothes! I mean, what did you think of *fighting* them?!”

“Oh, that? Aside from the ones who came right at me, the others were throwing knives from a distance to keep me in check. I had my hands full dodging that...”

Needless to say, Gourry’s skills were on another level for him to hold his own in a four-on-one fight. But normally, he still would’ve been able to find a weakness in the opponent’s defenses and break through. The fact that he hadn’t this time told me his opponents had quickly taken his measure and countered accordingly.

“Well, it *was* four against one, but even so, it’s pretty impressive they could go toe-to-toe with you,” I remarked.

“I suppose this is all going to be rather complicated...” Amelia frowned as she listened to our story.

The sun hung in the western sky. When Gourry and I left the guesthouse, it was too late to be called afternoon but too early to be called evening.

We’d explained the rough particulars of the story to Amelia, and that was that. We hadn’t had time to go into depth about Dynast and the Dark Lord, and we didn’t know much about the situation in town either. We had plenty of smaller stuff to chat about, but we didn’t want to stay too long and annoy her bodyguards, so we’d decided to cut things short.

“So, what do we do next?” Gourry asked.

“Hmm... I think something happened earlier, so I’d like to find out what, but...” I said thoughtfully in response. We still had a while before sunset, but not long enough for us to leave the city and investigate. “Okay. Let’s get back to Master MacLyle’s place and—”

“Eat?”

“That too! But first, I have some things I want to ask him.”

For our lodging, we were staying at MacLyle's Silver Leaf Inn. Part of the reason was that, when we decided to take the job, he'd offered to let us stay for free and given us 20 percent off our meals. But MacLyle was also the head of the local security detail, which made the inn our home base for reporting our findings. It was just convenient for us to set up camp there.

It was now the hour most folks were out and about shopping for dinner, so people were coming and going all through town. The sound of pounding metal from near and far was a natural part of the ambiance in the city of blacksmiths. The people who lived in towns like this tended to be the blustery sort, but the atmosphere right now was far from jolly. The raiders' presence must have cast a pall on everything.

On our way back to the inn, I was struck with an idea and took a detour for some shopping myself. When we at last returned to the Silver Leaf...

"Hey," MacLyle greeted us as we came through the door. It was still a bit early for dinner, so there were no customers in the first-floor eatery. The indoor lamps weren't lit yet, and the weakening late afternoon sun streaming in the windows painted shadows from the aged pillars, chairs, and tables. MacLyle was set up behind the counter. The aroma of delicious stew, or something like it, wafted through the restaurant as he prepared for the dinner crowd.

"Welcome back. Did you finish your talk?"

"More or less. We didn't get to go into details, but we covered the gist of things. You're not attending the banquet, Master MacLyle?" I asked.

He shot me an awkward smile as Gourry and I took seats at a table. "Nah. Only a select few big shots get to attend. They just rolled me out for the welcome to make it seem bigger. Gotta say, I had no idea you two were friends of the Saillune royal family..."

I gave him a pained smile back. "And I had no idea a Saillune VIP was going to be stopping by... Though, as head of local security, I'm guessing *you* knew."

He busied himself with something behind the counter and didn't seem particularly abashed by my insinuation. "Yeah, sorry I didn't mention it. I was worried that word would reach the bandits if I did."

"What? You think someone in town is leaking information?"

“They’ve anticipated our plans a few too many times to think otherwise. It’s probably best to assume that that’s the case.”

Aha. Can’t blame him for being cautious, then...

“By the way, Master MacLyle, speaking of the bandits... We ran into them in the forest.”

“What?!” he cried in shock.

“They ran away when the Saillune guys came, though,” Gourry added.

“H-H-Hang on a minute!” MacLyle launched into a flurry of activity, then came out from behind the counter carrying three wooden mugs—drinks for us, apparently. He placed them down in front of us and took an empty seat at the table. “You ran into the bandits?”

“Something happened today, right? An attack, maybe? This was shortly afterward, so I’d bet they’re related,” I petitioned.

“Could you tell me more?” MacLyle asked. “What did they look like?”

“They hid their faces so I couldn’t even tell if they were men or women, but...” I took a swig of the drink, some kind of apple-based juice. I then gave a summary of our encounter with the raiders and concluded, “That about covers it. Now, we assume something happened out there, but we don’t know what. We were wondering if you’d heard anything, and if you had, if you might clue us in.”

“I’ve only heard bits and pieces myself so far. There was a cave-in at one of the mines, and people thought it might be the bandits—rather, the raiders—using an attack spell. I received the report and sent my crew for search and rescue, but none of them have returned yet, so I don’t know—”

Ra-ring. The door chime interrupted MacLyle. We all looked over at the open door to see...

“Mistress Alaina,” MacLyle greeted her.

The elf opened her mouth... then noticed me and Gourry, moved her lips silently, and closed them. She’d probably said something. Her voice was just too quiet to hear.

“Welcome back. Perfect timing. Care to tell us what happened out there?” MacLyle asked.

After a moment’s hesitation, like a cautious stray cat investigating offered food, she timidly approached—her eyes locked on me and Gourry—and whispered something behind MacLyle.

“Er...” MacLyle, seeming to find it embarrassing, turned to face her. “Could you please say it so that everyone can hear?”

Whew... Alaina sucked in a trembling breath and began rummaging through her pockets.

“Ah. Hang on a minute,” I said, then pulled what I’d bought in town out from my tunic. To most people, they’d just look like two rather large coins of unfamiliar currency. I cast a simple spell on one and handed it to Alaina. “You can have this. I bought it at the local sorcerers’ council. It’s a magic item known as a Regulus Disc, and it’ll make it so we can hear your voice just fine. You seem to have a hard time speaking at a normal volume face-to-face, but if you just whisper into this, we’ll still hear you.”

Alaina timidly extended a hand... then snatched up the Regulus Disc and burrowed under the nearest table in a flash. “Test. Test... Test, test. Oh, I’m audible!” I heard her voice emanating from the Regulus Disc still in my hand. “You humans *do* make useful tools from time to time! If you had one of these, why didn’t you give it to me earlier?!”

“Heh. You’re entering domineering mode, but keep it in check or I’ll haul you up by your collar and make you talk at point-blank range, okay?”

“Ah... I’m sorry... I didn’t mean... I’ll try to be careful, so please don’t make me talk at point-blank range...”

Huhhh... She had very extreme ideas about keeping her distance from others.

“But... this really is very convenient. Could I keep it? I’ll pay, of course.”

“Hmm...” While I was contemplating whether to sell it at cost or rip her off...

“I’m sorry, but could we negotiate this later? Right now, I want to hear what happened at the mine,” Master MacLyle interjected.

“Ah, yes. Go ahead,” I agreed.

He then said to Alaina, “Now, I believe you went to the scene yourself. What did you see?”

At this, she spoke smoothly. “The site was the second mine. There was a cave-in. There were injuries, but no dead or missing. I returned early to report, but Randa is leading the rescue operation and the entire security force is pitching in. They expect the operation to wrap up before nightfall, but it’ll be at least a few days before the mine is back in business. And an inspection of the scene suggests clear influence over bephemoth earth spirits caused the landslide.”

It was an excellent summary of the situation. Too bad she had to give it while hiding under the table...

However, I did have one question. “Who’s Randa?”

“The man you knocked out when you first arrived here,” MacLyle informed me.

Ahh, the roughneck-looking security dude. I’d totally forgotten his name. But if he was the one running the show... Boy, they must be short on people. Or maybe that was the one thing he didn’t suck at?

“Just to be sure, is there any chance that one of the miners cast the spell that caused the landslide?” I asked, considering the possibility it was an inside job.

“No,” Alaina responded firmly. “I found the spell’s point of origin, and it was on the outside, some distance away.”

“You found the spell’s point of origin? You can do that?!” I found myself shouting.

There were some spells and situations where you could track the magic back to where it was activated. Except this one had caused a landslide, which would ordinarily get rid of all traces...

But she just said, as casually as could be, “Well, it’s obvious if you look for traces of interference with the bephemoths, though?”

“Traces of interference...?” I said, mouthing the unfamiliar phrase.

“Yes. It’s possible that humans can’t see them.”

“You mean elves *can*?!”

“We sense them more than we see them, but... yes.”

I was friends with an elf, but this was the first I’d heard of it... Granted, it’s not like the subject of how elves perceive their surroundings had ever come up between us. I knew humans and elves differed greatly in magical ability, but I didn’t know that they straight-up *saw things* differently.

“But I still couldn’t find the bandits in the end.”

“Ah, about that,” MacLyle said. “Our two friends here seem to have encountered them.”

“What?!” I could feel Alaina tremble under the table. “You met them, Elder Lina?!”

“Yeah, kinda. Wait, what’s with the ‘elder’ all of a sudden?! Just call me Lina.”

“Lina... but if you go without a title, does that mean that I outrank you?”

“You can still think of me as your elder. Just drop the title.”

“Ah... I will. I’m sorry.”

Her sense of distance regarding interpersonal relationships was also annoying! Why did one of us have to outrank the other? I just figured we were equals... Though I was pretty sure if I said that, Alaina would go into domineering mode again.

“So... what were they like?” she asked.

“There were at least six of them, I think, covered in cloth from head to toe. I couldn’t even tell if they were male or female.”

“Did you sense anything else?”

“They were pretty good fighters, and they gave us the slip in the end. Despite everyone calling them bandits, I don’t think they can be just any bandits.”

At this, Alaina went silent.

“If they’re not bandits... who are they, and what are they after?” MacLyle spoke in her place.

I shrugged. “Wish I knew. They didn’t seem like the spill-all-our-plans-to-folks-we-just-met types. I have a rough idea of the direction they ran in, but I doubt we’d find their base by just beelining it.”

“Still, this is a big step in the right direction. We haven’t been able to get a bead on them before this. Keep up the good work tomorrow, would you?”

“Sure, we’ll do our best.”

Or so I said, but it felt like things were getting kind of out of hand. It had only been a day—rather, half a day—since we’d arrived in Atessa, and it had been pretty damned eventful.

I took another sip of my apple juice, resisting the urge to sigh.

Morning came early in a city of blacksmiths—by which I mean to say I was awoken by the sound of smiths striking their anvils. Had it been birdsong, I’d have gladly slept through it. But hammers on steel? Yeah, I couldn’t ignore that. The townspeople were probably used to it, but I sure as heck wasn’t.

Unable to go back to sleep, I got up, climbed down to the eatery on the first floor, and found Gourry already there. The sound must have woken him up too.

Following a light breakfast of salad, bread, bacon, eggs, mashed potatoes, minestrone soup, risotto, gratin, apple pie, fruit, milk, and juice, I took a quiet sip of my after-meal tea. And just as I was letting out a deep sigh... I heard the shop’s door chime ring loudly.

“You! There you are!” I turned toward the panicked voice and saw a familiar-looking older man standing there. He was walking straight toward us. “You know Princess Amelia, don’t you?!”

Suddenly I remembered him. He was one of the men who’d welcomed the Saillune delegation to the guesthouse yesterday. The mayor, I think.

“Er, yes?” I replied.

The mayor then looked around, ran up to our table, and spoke in a hushed voice, “Princess Amelia isn’t here, is she?”

“No, she isn’t...”

What a peculiar question that was. Amelia was a special envoy from Saillune, after all. She should've had bodyguards with her at all times, and just because we knew each other didn't mean she could just come by to hang out whenever she wanted. The mayor undoubtedly knew that too, so the only reason he'd ask me such a thing was...

"She's not... missing, is she?" I asked, keeping my voice down.

At this, he turned visibly pale. "Mm." He opened his mouth to speak, then changed his mind and closed it. He tried this another time or two, then said, "...I think she's been kidnapped..."

...

"Say whaaaaat?!" The simultaneous cry from me and Gourry sent a shockwave through the morning air around us.

2: A Reunion of Allies in Atessa

The tension at the guesthouse was as thick as could be.

It was me, Gourry, MacLyle, and the mayor. We entered the building and proceeded inward. The soldiers standing at attention should have remembered us, yet they regarded us with suspicion. Nobody said anything the whole time. Eventually, we came to a door.

“Could you perchance explain things now, Sir Mayor?” MacLyle finally asked as we came to a stop. It had been a long walk here from the inn, but we couldn’t exactly talk about a VIP being abducted while in the public eye.

The mayor nodded, knocked on the door, and then opened it without waiting for a response.

Within was the room Gourry and I had visited the day before. It had carpeting, tapestries, a large table and desk, plus a grand canopy bed in the back. There were also several maids present and about six soldiers. It looked just the same as it had—aside from Amelia’s absence.

“When morning broke, the princess was nowhere to be found,” the mayor informed us. He looked around at the soldiers and the maids. “The night shift soldiers and night duty maids all said they were suddenly overwhelmed by exhaustion and collapsed. There’s magic that can put people into a slumber, isn’t there?”

“There’s the Sleeping spell,” I said. “But that usually doesn’t work on people who are alert, like in the middle of a fight...”

“Are you suggesting we weren’t being vigilant?!” one of the soldiers barked at me.

I shook my head. “That’s not what I mean. I’m saying we should consider possibilities other than magic. After all, there was no way in hell a Sleeping spell would’ve covered the entire guesthouse... Maybe there was something in the drinks. Or some kind of incense-based soporific. Or either of those combined

with a Sleeping spell to enhance it. Did you notice anything like that?”

The soldiers and maids all exchanged a glance, but my suggestions didn’t seem to ring any bells.

The mayor looked at me pleadingly. “Is there *any* chance that Princess Amelia just slipped out without telling anyone?”

“Well... I doubt it,” I confessed. Knowing Amelia, hearing about the raiders making trouble for the city had probably set her burning sense of justice alight. She might’ve even been eager to dish out punishment. But even so, she would’ve known it was pointless for her to run off on her own when she didn’t even know where their camp was.

“Then... that means...” The mayor’s voice shrank until it disappeared entirely.

Without any other options, I completed his statement. “It’s reasonable to assume she was kidnapped by the people who attacked the city, yeah.”

The mayor’s face grew even paler. “Th-Then we must find her... mobilize local security... yes, I’ll contact the authorities as well...”

“Calm down,” I said reassuringly.

Heedless, the mayor kept pacing around aimlessly. “Calm down?! This is a crisis for me... No, not just me! It’s an international crisis between Zephilia and Saillune!”

“I think it’ll work out somehow.”

“You can’t possibly think— What?” The mayor blinked a few times. “You think this is going to work out somehow?!”

“Yep.”

“*How?!?*”

“I can’t share the details just yet since it might send my plans off the rails, sooo...” I improvised, then looked around at the people in the room. “Just wait and see.”

The wind rustled the leaves in the endless expanse of greenery dappled by

soothing sunlight. I was sitting at the base of a large tree, looking up, and the rays kaleidoscopically filtered through swaying layers of foliage. It would've been the perfect spot for a picnic, but...

"So, how long do we wait?" Gourry muttered from where he sat next to me.

"Dunno," I said easily.

"Hey now..." Not even Gourry could just brush that one off. "Were you just BSing them back there? Do you really think this'll work out?"

"BSing them?! No way. I totally know what I'm doing!" I insisted.

After learning of Amelia's abduction, I'd advised everyone—including the local security detail—to act as if all was normal. Panicking would only play into the enemy's hands, I told them, so the soldiers of Zephilia and Saillune in particular needed to be on standby at the guesthouse in case a ransom demand arrived.

Obviously, no one was pleased with my brusque explanation, but the only alternative was a random search through the vast woods—which everyone knew would be pointless. So, as dubious as they all were about my plan, they decided to listen to me.

After that, Gourry and I had prepared bread and drinks for lunch and then set out into the forest. And here we'd been sitting for a while, waiting.

"At the soonest, it won't be long at all. And at the latest... it'll be tomorrow morning or so."

"*Or so?* Well, I know you well enough to believe you've thought this through, but..." Gourry looked all around him. "Do we really have to wait here? We can't do this in town?"

The grass around us was singed, for we were sitting where we'd tangled with the raiders the previous day.

"The city's not out of the question, but I think this is the ideal spot."

"If you say so," Gourry responded.

Our conversation tapered off, and we spent a little longer sitting around in peace until...

“Hey.” Gourry stood up suddenly and glanced deeper into the forest. “You were right.”

I stood up too and turned my gaze in the same direction. There were two figures approaching us from the trees.

One of them ran up to us as they hailed, “Lina! Master Gourry!”

I probably don’t have to tell you who it was—the supposed abductee herself, Amelia. And trailing behind her was a man in white with a hood pulled low over his eyes.

“What’s going on, Lina?” Gourry asked, his head cocked.

“Long story,” said the robed man as he lifted his hood. His revealed face was handsome enough, but his skin was hard, blue, and inorganic. His silver hair sparkled with a metallic sheen under the mottled sunlight.

Zelgadis Greywords. Me and Gourry’s first encounter with him had been as enemies, but circumstances had led him to join our party. He knew Amelia too.

“Hey, been a while,” Gourry said, waving lightly.

“It has indeed... Wait, Gourry, you actually remember me?” Zel said jokingly.

Gourry smiled breezily in response. “Oh, come on. Of course I remember you!”

“Okay, just to be sure, what’s my name?”

“I know your name!”

“Then say it,” Zel insisted.

Gourry scratched his head bashfully. “C’mon, give me a break.”

“Give you a break?!” Zel, Amelia, and I all cried out in unison. My man’s response was *that* absurd!

Not even Zel could avoid losing his cool. “Now hang on a minute, Gourry! You didn’t really forget my name, did you?! Say it! I’m not even asking for my full name! Just my first name! Even a *nickname* would do!” He seemed a little desperate... though I understood why.

Meanwhile, Gourry smiled all the same. “I remember. Don’t worry. You just

want me to say it, right? I'll let Lina here do that for me."

"Why me?!"

"He forgot it..." Zel whispered, his face awash with despair.

Gourry waved his hands hurriedly in response. "I'm kidding! I really do remember. It's Zel-something, right?"

"Oh... so you *do* remember," Zel said in relief.

...

"Waitamminute, Zel! You're genuinely satisfied with 'Zel-something'?" I asked, outraged.

But his response was calm. "Of course I am."



“Why?!” I demanded.

“Think about it. This is Gourry. It’s impressive he remembered *that* much.”

“I mean... as long as you’re cool with it, I guess. Anyway, let’s head to the city. Now’s not the time for chit-chat, right?”

With that, we all began the trek to Atessa. Amelia spoke up on the way, “So... I really don’t have the slightest idea of what’s going on.”

Hmm, where to start...

“Well, I’ll tell you what I can. The truth is, when we were fighting the raiders yesterday, I realized that Zel was one of them.” I hadn’t been able to see his face, but he’d used the exact same moves he’d tried on me when we first fought ages ago—so I’d responded in kind to show my recognition. “You’re working with the raiders to help find a way to restore your old body, huh?”

“Was it that obvious?” Zel replied with a slight shrug.

Before meeting us, Zelgadis had been in the employ of a sorcerer named Red Priest Rezo who’d turned him into a chimeric fusion of brow daemon, rock golem, and man to sate his lust for power. As I understood it, he was now on a wandering journey in hopes of discovering a way to restore his humanity. I’d already sussed out that he’d joined up with the raiders to that end, and I’d been hoping I wouldn’t have to spill the beans about it until I was entirely sure what was going on...

“But then the envoy from Saillune arrived. I’ll bet the raiders thought they could kidnap her and use her to make demands.” I looked in Zel’s direction. “Except once they got her back to camp, you were in for a big shock. And you knew she’d go on a rampage the minute she woke up...”

“Hey!” Amelia shouted, pouting. “You make me sound like some kind of berserker!”

“Okay, let me ask this. If you woke up and found yourself surrounded by villains, what would you do?”

“What else?!” she responded, clenching a fist. “I’d bring down the hammer of justice!”

“Exactly what Lina said,” Zel groaned.

A small wince crept into my smile. “Zel knew that would ruin everything, leaving him no choice but to save Amelia. He also knew that raiders would give chase immediately, so heading straight for the city would either mean getting caught or giving the baddies time to set up an ambush elsewhere. Moreover, he realized that I’d be anticipating all this too. So we needed to meet up somewhere we both knew. Somewhere no one else would think to look. And where could be more perfect than where we fought yesterday?”

“I see! That makes sense!” Amelia said, beaming.

“Aha...” Gourry muttered vacantly, nodding along. It was crystal clear he remained totally clueless.

Amelia then tilted her head. “So, how exactly did I get kidnapped in the first place? There were soldiers on watch, and even if they all fell asleep, most people awaken when they sense evil intent nearby.”

Well, I don't think most people do. But you, Amelia? I'd buy that.

Deciding not to say as much aloud, I instead replied, “The soldiers and the maids seem to think a Sleeping spell was cast over the entire guesthouse. That’s probably why you didn’t wake up.”

“Sleeping?” Amelia asked warily. She was skilled in white and shamanistic magic. She knew how the spell worked, and she likely shared my doubts about the Sleeping theory.

“Oh, that? I suspect—” Zel began. But just then...

“Haaang on a second.” Gourry stopped the group in its tracks.

We were some ways out from Atessa. I wouldn’t say we were far, exactly, but far enough that the city was still obscured by the trees.

Gourry’s reason for stopping us, however, was immediately apparent. We all came to a halt and peered deeper into the trees. The next thing I knew, Gourry had his hand on his sword, ready to draw it.

Soon, a figure melted out of the shadows of the woods. They were dressed in the same dark green tunic and pants as the raiders we’d tangled with the day

before. Their hair and throat were still covered with sand-colored cloth too, but their face was exposed. Perhaps they'd been in too much of a hurry to track down Zel. Or perhaps they'd decided covering their face wasn't worth it. Maybe both.

Their face was quite attractive, although I couldn't peg their gender. When they spoke, however, it was the same male voice I'd traded words with the day before. "What are you doing, Zelgadis?"

"I happen to know this girl. I really couldn't just let you kidnap her." Zel gestured toward Amelia. "And despite how she looks, she's Saillune royalty. You could turn a whole kingdom against you if you're not careful."

"As if I care," the man shot back immediately.

Zel released a deep sigh, then replied, "I knew you'd say that, Tessius. You're far too reckless."

"And you're far too careful, Zelgadis. You act so superior, yet you constantly advocate the most spineless tactics. I've deferred to you all this time, but now I see where that gets me."

Normally I would've taken the opportunity while they were catching up to start casting a spell and blast Tessius from an unexpected angle, but in the moment, I couldn't make a move. I was partly hoping that if I let him talk, he'd get careless and spill some useful info, but more importantly, I had yet to figure out what we were really up against. I could sense a number of presences blended into the surrounding forest, but I couldn't tell how many there were or their exact locations. Just punking Tessius right away wouldn't have done us much good under the circumstances, and it ran the risk of setting off his friends.

"Even so," Tessius said with a sigh, "while I dislike your selfishness, such distaste is hardly a reason for us to engage in mutual destruction. Therefore, if you agree to my terms, I'll agree to let you all go."

Huh? Now here's a change...

"How uncharacteristically accommodating of you," Zel replied sarcastically, still on guard.

Tessius shrugged a little. "It's more that I realize that killing you won't get us

any closer to our goal.”

“So, what are your terms?”

“First, don’t get in our way,” Tessius began calmly. “This is less a ‘term’ and more a ‘prerequisite.’ Surely you understand. No one in their right mind would let an opponent go knowing they intend to be a thorn in your side. Once you’ve agreed to back down, then before I tell you my conditions...” Tessius’s even voice drifted by on the wind that rustled the leaves. “Zelgadis, I think you already know this, but I’ll explain our objective officially. I don’t want any misunderstandings, and I’m sure there are some things you can’t judge unless you know exactly what we’re after...”

Near and far, the leaves danced... Just then, Gourry sliced his sword through the air, letting out a sharp sound!

“What?!” Tessius cried as he leaped back, surprise openly visible on his face.

“Hey, Gourry! What are you doing?!” I shouted, roused from my sleepy stupor.

...Wait, sleepy stupor?!

“What did you do?” Gourry snarled.

“You noticed?!” Tessius demanded, sounding truly shaken.

“Wha...? What happened?” Amelia asked uncertainly.

“I think... it was a Sleeping spell,” I answered. “He offered a reasonable compromise to get our guard down while someone else cast Sleeping on us from a distance, I’ll bet.”

Gourry had realized it and drawn his sword to create a sudden tension that overrode the spell’s effects. If he hadn’t... Well, even if we hadn’t actually fallen asleep, it would’ve left us pretty damned flat-footed.

“I didn’t *feel* like I was letting my guard down, of course,” I added. But I couldn’t deny that the spell had been taking hold of me.

“So that’s what he was up to... Stay vigilant, everyone! Their casters are a cut above!” Zelgadis shouted. “Tessius, I thought you were being unusually reasonable... but if that’s your game, there’ll be no negotiations!”

“Tch!” Tessius clicked his tongue and leaped back.

When he did, four figures appeared from the underbrush behind him. The new figures threw something at us that howled through the air. And then...

“Diem Wind!” *Vwoosh!*

Amelia had probably been chanting while Zel and I were talking, and she didn’t hesitate to let her spell rip! Diem Wind didn’t do anything more than create a powerful gust of wind, but that was sufficient to knock the unknown projectiles off track. Most were blown away, and as for the handful that kept coming...

Zing! Gourry batted them out of the air with his blade. I caught a glimpse of one out of the corner of my eye as it fell to the ground harmlessly—it was like a dark, knife-like object.

The four new figures stepped forward as if to back up Tessius. Zel and I began chanting.

“Foggul.” Tessius activated a spell of his own a moment before we could finish. I didn’t recognize it, but—*Bwash!*—with a burst of sound and pressure, a white mist suddenly swallowed up my field of vision.

A smokescreen?! I exclaimed internally. The fog was just beginning to obscure Tessius’s figure, when...

“Flare Arrow!” Zel incanted. A dozen or so flaming darts streaked through the white hovering mist... Or not. In actuality, the mist coiled around the bolts and silently extinguished them.

The mutual cancellation phenomenon?! He used his spell to negate them both... That was what I thought, but the mist remained in place.

“What?!” Zel cried in shock.

“Freeze Arrow!” It was now my turn to sling a spell, and I conjured the icy version of the Flare Arrows that Zel had fired. Instead of disappearing, mine sailed toward Tessius. If they hit, their subzero chill would do anything from inflict frostbite to freeze him in place. I figured it would slow him down one way or the other.

But in response, Tessius unleashed a wind spell that scattered my volley of frigid projectiles. “Diem Wind!”

That jerk! He sure knows how to cast fast! Nevertheless, Gourry was hot on the trail of my Freeze Arrows. Yet before he could get in close...

“Ziglous,” a new voice incanted from behind Tessius. Through my still obscured vision, I could see a few streaks shoot up from the ground.

What?!

They looked like spears thrusting upward... but then they reached an apex and arced back down at us.

Zel, Amelia, and I stifled cries of surprise and moved to dodge the incoming attack. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see one coming straight for Gourry. He stopped to slash at it with his sword, tearing it into pieces.

The spear-like streaks then twisted and raged like whips or tentacles, as if seeking out prey to ensnare. I could now see that they’d grown out of the projectiles from before. Had the caster used knives as an intermediary to summon the tentacles? *Another spell I’ve never heard of?!*

I couldn’t escape the feeling that something strange was going on. Obviously, not even I knew every single spell in the world... but still, something about this was off. The shape of it was all wrong. But I could find out what the spell was later!

Amelia took one step to the side. “Elemekia Lance!” she cried, launching her brilliant javelin at Tessius.

But Tessius wasn’t about to just stand there and let it hit him. He dodged it effortlessly with a big leap backward. The light passed in front of him as he did—and nailed one of his friends!

That must have been why Amelia had shifted positions. She’d lined up a trajectory crossing two targets so that even if Tessius dodged, she’d hit the guy behind him. And since Tessius had been blocking his friend’s view, the dude probably hadn’t seen it coming until it was too late. He lurched slightly, then... dissipated without a sound!

“Huh?!” Amelia let out a cry of surprise. Elemekia Lance dealt damage directly to an opponent’s spirit. It couldn’t physically hurt its target, but it would knock them out. It wasn’t the kind of spell that should vaporize someone.

Tessius continued to draw back, getting his distance from Gourry, as the remaining three figures came forward to take his place.

That’s when I cast my next spell! “Blast Ash!”

Vrrrm! With a low rumble, I produced a black sphere. But instead of at Tessius and his pals, I chucked it about knee-high at a tree a little ways away. The blackness expanded to the width of the trunk and then disappeared, taking that section of the trunk with it. With nothing to hold it up now, the tree began to tilt...

Krshfshfshfsh! The leaves of the falling tree shook violently as it crashed toward Tessius’s three friends. My plan was to snipe them individually as they tried to dodge... but they didn’t so much as move. They just let the tree crush them and then sprang up again as though nothing had happened!

What?! Obviously, no ordinary human could do such a thing.

The worst-case scenario was that we were dealing with pure demons. Pure demons were essentially astral creatures that could both be pulverized by spells doing spiritual damage *and* shrug off physical damage from, say, a tree falling on them. But I’d fought plenty of pure demons before, and these guys didn’t quite strike me as the type. Still, they weren’t flesh-and-blood beings either...

Just as I was putting it all together, a voice spoke from afar. “Olgious.” This time, countless tentacles sprouted from Tessius’s allies and lashed at us! Their clusters were far too dense and numerous to dodge entirely.

Zelgadis crouched down, placed one hand on the ground, and incanted, “Dug Haute!”

The flat earth below yielded to his summons. It immediately rose up, producing countless spires of dirt and stone. Zel had activated the spell in between us and the enemy, effectively conjuring a wall to shield us from the incoming tentacles. Dug Haute beseeched bephemoths, spirits of the ground, to shape the earth around them. He’d probably chanted the spell with the intent

to use it offensively, and this little defensive maneuver was on-the-fly improv.

Most of the incoming tentacles were halted by the spires, either run through by them or forced to twine their way around them. A few tentacles still managed to breach the wall, but with their numbers drastically reduced, they weren't nearly as scary. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Gourry and Zel slicing through them as Amelia dodged. I drew my shortsword and sliced at one coming my way too. Up close, they appeared to be more flora than fauna. So, *vines rather than tentacles?*

The earthen wall between us and the enemy limited their movement, but it also prevented us from advancing straight forward too.

"To the left!" I called, and the whole group ran with me.

The figures that had unleashed the vines tried to pursue us, but—"Elemekia Lance!"—Amelia fired a second brilliant javelin and demolished another one of them. The remaining two, however, didn't slow their pace.

Meanwhile, Tessius showed no sign of a follow-up attack. He was still shrouded in his white mist, so I was hoping he'd just split. As much as I wanted to put an end to things there and then, our most pressing objective was getting Amelia safely back to town.

We were on a roundabout detour to get there... when a sense of malice coursed through the area. A moment later, I heard the faint sound of something whistling through the air from my left.

Arrows?!

But before I could even react—*Clink!*—Gourry had already stepped in and cut the arrow down with his sword. It was pretty clear I was its intended target. If Gourry hadn't covered me, I'm not sure I could have dodged it.

There was probably an archer—someone other than Tessius—who'd gotten around to our flank. But how were they targeting us with visibility compromised by the mist? This fight was exceptional in a lot of ways, but in spite of everything, my focus had to stay on getting the heck outta there!

Zel fired an Elemekia Lance while keeping an eye on the figures still pursuing us. Meanwhile, I cooked up a spell myself.

“Fireball!”

Where was I aiming? Where the arrow had come from, obviously! The bead of light I fired would zoom through the air and explode in a big burst of flame when it struck something. I couldn't see the archer, but hitting anything in their vicinity should keep 'em busy.

At least, that was the theory. But before my bead of light could go anywhere, it was enveloped by the mist and vanished.

I felt a chill run up my spine.

I'd finally realized what that white mist really was. It wasn't a smokescreen or a distraction, and the reason Zel's Flare Arrows had fizzled before wasn't just coincidental mutual cancellation. The mist suppressed the activation of fire-type spells. Obscuring our vision was probably just a helpful side effect.

Still... was something like that really possible? Our opponent clearly had some crazy magic up their sleeve. Zel had suggested as much earlier, but damn.

I felt another surge of malice. The sniper probably had their eye trained on me again. Just then, Gourry swapped his sword to his left hand and unceremoniously swung his right.

“Geh!” came a yelp from the direction the archer was hiding.

Wait a second...

“Did you just hit him?!” I couldn't help yelling out in shock when I processed what had happened.

“Looks like.”

Gourry must have beamed the guy with a stone or throwing knife—which seemed impossible. The area was thick with white mist. We had no visual. And you couldn't throw a stone nearly as far as you could fire an arrow. Yet without fail, Gourry had...

“How is that even possible?!” Amelia cried in similar shock.

But the big lug simply responded, like it was nothing special, “I just threw in the direction the arrow came from.”

Hoo boy... I knew Gourry was a first-rate swordsman, but *this* was some truly unreal skill. Our opponents had to have been even more shocked than I was. *Gotta take advantage of this!*

As that thought entered my brain, suddenly, without any warning... the mist disappeared and I could see again.

“What?!” Tessius howled.

With the fog gone, the earthen spires, the vines twining around them, our two remaining pursuers, and Tessius standing some distance away were all visible.

“What did you do?!” he yelled in a panic.

I smirked in reply. “You want to know?”

In truth, I had no freaking clue why the mist had lifted. But that wasn’t going to stop me from bluffing my ass off. Before I could get any further...

“Elemekia Lance!” Zel speared one of the two pursuing figures.

Fwsh! It exploded in a shower of leaves and vines! Ah, so they were plants animated by and controlled with magic. Plant golems, you might say. I knew of wood golems, of course, but this was my first time seeing one that was just a mass of foliage.

“Tessius! Withdraw!” someone called from the presumed direction of the archer. When I looked, though, all I could see was a veil of green. He was either hiding behind something, or he had on really good camouflage.

“Tch!” Tessius clicked his tongue and swiftly retreated into the trees.

“Not so fast!” I shouted—but didn’t give chase, natch.

Just letting them scarper would be like admitting we were struggling too, so I thought a little bravado would scare ’em off good. Everyone else seemed to realize what I was playing at, because they stayed rooted to the spot. And sure enough, the hostile presences soon vanished from the scene.

“Seems like they’re gone,” Zel said with a sigh of relief and sheathed his sword to mark the end of the fight. “But how did you dispel that mist, Lina?”

Tessius had sounded convinced it was *someone's* doing, but... "Wasn't me," I replied with a shrug.

"Who, then?" Amelia asked, puzzled.

I smiled indomitably in response. "Why don't you come out already?" I called.

This was another bit of bravado I wasn't expecting to pay off, although it'd be cool if it did. The others seemed onto me, however, as they all stood there staring in my direction.

"Okay..." Amelia said, her eyes locked my way. "Who's that?"

"Who's what?" I looked behind me... and there stood Alaina. "Bwuh?!"

"Bwah?!" After being startled by my exclamation of surprise, Alaina began silently flapping her lips like a fish out of water.

Curse you, Alaina! You snuck up that close to me with your presence completely cloaked?!

"What are you doing here?" I found myself asking.

She touched something like buttons on each side of her collar and began whispering. *Ah... The Regulus Discs.* I'd ended up selling them to her at a friend discount, and she'd attached them to her collar like fasteners. She'd probably just whispered the activation incantation.

"The forest was in such an uproar," she finally replied via the discs as she stood back up. I couldn't quite understand if that was an answer or not, but I guess her elf senses told her when and where things were going down in the forest.

"Hang on, if you just got here... Are you the one who dispelled that mist?"

"Well... yes..." she replied noncommittally.

At this point, Zel remarked with a curious strain in his voice, "An elf?!"

"Yeah, so what?" I asked.

"Right, I haven't told you yet," Zel responded, keeping a watchful eye on Alaina. "Tessius and his band are elves trying to drive humans out of the forest."

"They're elves?!" I shouted.

“Yes,” Alaina said, half interrupting me. “And the reason I’m here... is to try and stop them.”

At first, there was just a lot of shouting. Which was perfectly understandable. The abduction of Amelia, a princess of Saillune and an official envoy, was an international incident. Yet Gourry and I had made a few vague statements, gone off to search for her, and returned like nothing was wrong. Plus, Zelgadis looked *super* suspicious.

Those present included the mayor, MacLyle, Saillune’s captain of the guard, the captain of the Zephilian soldiers stationed at the old lord’s manor, the local security guy named Randa or whatever, the maids, and a few others. Then there were the four of us and Alaina. We’d all gathered in a room in the guesthouse—Amelia’s, to be exact—when the shouting began.

“This is your responsibility!”

“It was negligence of duty!”

“On whose authority?!”

“Would you like sour cream on your scones?!”

“It’s a matter of personal readiness!”

Questions, complaints, grumbles, lectures... Everyone was yelling over each other with such speed and fury that it was hard to tell who was talking to whom.

I waited until they started to get tired of the shouting before I clapped my hands together to get their attention. “Okay! It’s time we sort this all out. We’ll go one person at a time. Ready?”

“Who put you in charge?!” the mayor barked.

“Allow me to take charge, then,” Amelia declared crisply. We’d discussed on our way back to town how I’d find an opportunity for her to lead the discussion. She looked all around the room, making eye contact with each and every person present in turn, then said, “The first thing we need to do is ensure we’re all on the same page about the situation. Then we’ll figure out the enemy’s next

move and how to counter it. I'll entertain questions and suggestions, but I'll have no more complaints or finger-pointing. Criticism of security over my kidnapping is out of the question as well. Is that understood?"

That's a royal for you... She said it all so straight and plain, you could even feel the authority radiating out of her.

Once she said that finger-pointing was off the table, the mayor and guard captains didn't have anything else to say. The local security guys went quiet too. And just as silence overtook the room...

"Would you like sour cream on your scones?"

"Yes, lots, please!" Amelia responded grandly.

The maids swiftly began preparing chairs and tables for a crowd. Amelia sat down, and the others began taking her lead. As the maids began serving tea and scones, Amelia spoke up again.

"Now, let's begin the introductions," she said, gesturing to Zel. "This is my personal undercover agent, Master Zelgadis."

"Personal... undercover agent?" someone whispered.

A bit of a buzz ran through the room, but Amelia ignored it and continued. "Upholding justice demands the grand power of states and armies! But the fact remains that there are places even they cannot reach! That is why I gave this man free rein to conduct undercover investigations, sniffing out various nefarious activities in the vicinity of Saillune."

This was the strategy I'd fed her—rather, that I'd *proposed* to her on the way back to the city. Obviously, it was a load of hooey. If we told the town the honest truth about Zelgadis, the mayor and other citizens would either blow up on him or have him arrested. No matter his reasons, and even if he was on our side now, the bottom line was that he *had* been part of the group that was attacking Atessa. Of course, they were unlikely to start pointing fingers while he was actively working for us, and they'd know we couldn't afford to lose Zel as a fighter. This was a way we could cover for him, and which he could conveniently repay us for with his knowledge, his sword, his labor, and his cash.

Thing is, the story kinda fell apart if you stopped to think about it. A private

investigator wouldn't have any authority outside of their own country, after all. But when Amelia—both the victim of a kidnapping and a member of the royal family—said it, nobody was going to argue with her.

She continued, "It was a stroke of good fortune that he happened to be infiltrating the raiders' ranks when I arrived. I shall now ask him to tell us more about them." She cleared her throat here. "But before we proceed, I've asked him to refer to me without title in day-to-day life so that he'll do the same while on missions. He'll be doing so during his explanation as well, so do not criticize him for it."



Amelia had to say as much in advance to keep the mayor and the soldiers from an obligation to jump down Zel's throat for being disrespectful. That kind of thing was mostly a huge pain for both them and Amelia, but it was just the kind of thing royalty had to deal with.

"I'll start, then," Zelgadis began as he took the floor.

He'd given us the quick and dirty version on the way to Atessa, but there were details we hadn't heard yet. I was curious to hear the rest of the story.

"They call themselves the Forest Hounds. They're a band of elves led by a man named Tessius Crosaius. They have quite a few sympathizers and supporters, but only about five or six active members. Their goal is apparently to drive the humans out of this city and retake Celcelas Forest, which belonged to the elves long ago."

"Elves? Retaking Celcelas Forest?" As a few of them whispered, their eyes naturally turned to Alaina the elf.

Under the pressure of their gazes, she calmly stood up, then crouched down and hid under the table. At that reaction, everyone—including Zel and Amelia but excluding me and Gourry, who knew her well enough—fell into stunned silence.

"Ah," MacLyle began awkwardly. "She has severe social anxiety, so could you please not stare at her?"

A moment later, with much implied eye-rolling, everyone turned back to Zel.

"Wait a minute. You said they were a band of elves, but..." Randa of the local posse piped up. "How can that be? How'd you get in, then? You're not... an elf, are you?"

"No." Zel shrugged slightly. "How I ended up in this form is a long story, but I'm still technically human. I met the Forest Hounds' leader, Tessius, a long time ago."

I figured he meant back when he was working for the Red Priest, but I hadn't asked for details.

"I heard rumors that his Forest Hounds were up to something, so I reached

out. I assumed he'd turn me down, but they let me join with surprisingly little resistance... though it appears they just wanted me to do their dirty work and then cut me loose when the time came. In fact, they asked me to kill a few people in the city, but of course, I always found excuses to refuse."

"They wanted you to kill people?" The mayor turned pale.

"I was hoping to steer them toward moderating themselves... I guess they got impatient. They kidnapped Amelia without even consulting me," Zel explained. "I don't know if they meant to hold her for ransom or to start a war between Saillune and Zephilia, but either way, I couldn't let it happen. So I saved her, and here we are."

"W-War?" The mayor's face turned paler still. "B-But... why? Why now? I mean, I've always known elves lived in the forest long ago... But I'd heard they placed the forest in human hands and left. I've even been told the town custom of planting a new tree for every one we cut down was part of the accord we had with them. Even if they were unhappy with the arrangement, nothing's happened for decades or more... Why are they coming after us *now*?"

"About that..." I said deliberately. I waited to make sure everyone was looking at me before continuing. "Keep your eyes right where they are. I think the fastest explanation will come from someone incapable of talking if attention is focused on her. So whatever you do, keep looking at me." Another expression of irritation flashed across the crowd's faces, but once I got my point across, I said, "Alaina, could you explain? Nobody's looking now."

"They're really not looking?"

"Really."

"If they look, I'll run away, you hear me?"

Sheesh, social anxiety is one thing and this is another...

This time, the irritation on everyone's faces didn't abate.

"You're fine. Now tell us what you know about Tessius's Forest Hounds."

"Where should I start? Elves used to live in Celcelas Forest. When humans moved in, we coexisted at first, but things changed when they started cutting

down trees and smithing. The forest is precious to us elves, but the humans couldn't give up their livelihood. There was a period of fighting, but the elves decided to leave the forest to the humans if they agreed to plant a new tree for each one they cut down. That was roughly a hundred and fifty years ago."

"A hundred and fifty..." someone whispered vaguely.

"Yet not everybody agreed. There was a group that opposed the accord and wanted to see the forest returned to elven hands—that's the Forest Hounds. But their numbers were so few, and they knew that if they tried to do anything, they'd be up against humans and elves alike. Until very recently, they were a holdout in name alone. Except I heard they had a change of leadership recently, and they've grown more extreme ever since. If that's true... and if they manage to do harm to humans... they could inflame a war not just between themselves and this city, but between humans and elves at large. That's why I was dispatched here—to try to get things under control before they came to a head, and before the Forest Hounds were exposed as elves."

Aha... Alaina wanted to stop Tessius's band herself before their identities came out. That's why she'd initially objected to me and Gourry helping out the local security forces. Of course, even if she'd managed to make contact before we had, given her shyness, I doubt she would've convinced anyone.

"So they're after our land?" the mayor asked. "Even if they take the city, they couldn't run it, let alone the entire forest, with so few members."

"I don't think they're after the land, exactly," Alaina said. "It's not that they want to exploit its resources. How to explain this... The forest is special to elves. Many of us simply can't stomach the idea of humans disturbing it. Even if you agreed to replant what you cut down in the forest, elves still don't like the fact that it's being cut down in the first place. And some humans don't replant anyway, so some elves feel as though the accord hasn't been upheld."

When he heard this, the mayor scowled in displeasure. "Well, I agree that if some people aren't replanting, then that is a breach of the agreement. But we're still doing *some* replanting, and it's not actually harming you elves directly in any way. They're causing all this trouble for such trifle?"

"It's not trifle as far as elves are concerned," Alaina explained.

The mayor scowled deeper. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure how to explain this... It’s hard to put it into words, but we elves... We just can’t let it happen.”

“How am I supposed to understand if you won’t explain?”

“It makes sense to me,” I interrupted while Alaina struggled. “It’s not a great comparison, but everyone here knows about demons, right? Enemies of creation, seekers of absolute destruction? So ask yourselves this: why do demons seek destruction? If you asked a demon to explain it, you’d probably get a similar answer. Likewise, if a demon asked you why we *don’t* seek destruction, all you’d really be able to say is ‘we don’t want to be destroyed,’ right? If pressed further... Well, I think you’d come to the same sort of impasse. But even if it’s impossible for us to fully articulate ourselves, we can still try to understand one another. And what we can’t understand, we can still try to accept. That includes the elves’ feelings for the forest. The important thing isn’t understanding *why* the forest is important to the elves, but rather respecting that it *is* important to the elves.”

“Hmm...” I wasn’t sure if he accepted that or not, but the mayor cast a momentary glance at the table where Alaina was cowering. “Even if that’s how elves feel about the forest, why breach the accord now, after over a century?”

“That’s more than a lifetime to you humans... But we elves are long-lived, and quite a few of us were alive when the accord was forged. Our elders can recall what life was like before then as children. To us, it wasn’t *that* long ago. But I suspect that the reason Tessius’s group has begun taking action is due to more than just their change in leadership.”

“I agree there,” added Zelgadis. “Tessius isn’t the type to act without any hope of victory. Something has lit a fire underneath him. But that means we need to be especially cautious for now.”

“In case they get serious?” MacLyle asked.

Zel nodded. “Tessius’s group might see it this way: ‘Zelgadis, the one who told us to be circumspect in our actions, was a traitor. The best way to strike a blow against our enemy is to do the opposite of what the traitor wanted—make a big move immediately.’”

“But aren’t elves, as a race... peaceful, chivalrous, and pacifistic?” Randa asked, his voice trembling.

I couldn’t deny that the methods of Tessius’s gang were pretty far from the image most humans had of elves. I’d fought alongside an elf against demons not long ago myself, so I had feelings about tangling with their kind right now too.

“There are good and bad humans,” I put in, “so it only makes sense that elves come in the same flavors. There are those who abide the law and those who scorn it, those who spurn conflict and those who crave it. Oh, and there’s also a stereotype that humans are stronger and tougher than elves. While that isn’t wrong per se, it’s definitely a generalization. Moreover, they’re formidable foes when it comes to magic. The night they kidnapped Amelia, for instance, the reason everyone in the guesthouse fell so fast asleep is probably because it was a souped-up Sleeping spell courtesy of elf magic. A human sorcerer could never cast it over such a wide area, and it’d be virtually impossible to use on people who were on high alert. They have more powerful versions of any spells we know, plus some that we’ve never even seen before. In fact, we ended up in a little scuffle with the Forest Hounds on our way back to town with Amelia too. They had a spell that could nullify all fire magic, and one to grow animated vines from what looked like throwing knives. Alaina, do you have any idea what those spells are?”

“Let’s see... The one that prevented your fire magic is a modification of a spell used to put out forest fires. The things that looked like throwing knives are seeds of a plant known as a ballud, designed to sprout and grow quickly when a spell is cast on them.”

The room briefly went silent as she spelled it all out so casually. Anyone who didn’t know much about magic was probably just confused, but those who knew what was what were truly taken aback. Modifying a fire-extinguishing spell to negate all fire magic? Easier said than done. Even humans could come up with ways to cancel out individual spells, but generally speaking, you couldn’t suppress multiple spells in a row over a broad area without a magic circle that required a major ritual, or a crapload of magic items.

But the bigger surprise was the fast-growing seeds. To facilitate something like that, you’d need to provide consistent moisture and energy to stimulate

growth, which required very complex and delicate control. And to manage that all in the blink of an eye... To be blunt, it was inhuman. We didn't have that kind of magic power, much less that speed or precision. Meanwhile, Tessius and his band were chucking those spells around willy-nilly.

That's really the scariest part. Even spells like that are parlor tricks to them. If they start channeling that magic talent into true combat application...

Just then—*Bwoom!*—a heavy sound shook the room. Everyone froze up as they looked around.

"I'll see what that was! The rest of you, wait here!" one of the Zephilia soldiers at the door announced as he ran out. We could hear armored footsteps resound down the hall before swiftly returning with a companion.

"Reporting in!" the newly arrived soldier announced in a voice close to a cry. "The city was hit with an attack!" Not a second later—*Bwoom!*—another roar echoed out. The mayor turned pale, and the soldier clarified, "Correction! The city is *still being* hit!"

They're here already?! While the mayor just sat there, white as a sheet, Gourry, me, Zel, and Amelia ran straight out of the room.

3: Unleashed, the Hunting Dogs Bare Their Fangs

Smoke hung thick in the air.

That was the first thing we saw when we burst out of the room, ran down the hallway to the closest terrace, and looked out over the city of Atessa. Of course, plumes of smoke weren't exactly an unfamiliar sight in a town of blacksmiths. But two particular plumes were remarkably duskier than the others.

And then... *Fwoom!* There was a third explosion, and a new plume appeared.

"It's Tessius!" Zel shouted.

"I'll bet!" Amelia said, glaring toward the smoke.

Hang on a minute here! Zel had pointed out the possibility that Tessius's Forest Hounds could attack any minute now, but even so, this seemed a little *too* sudden. *Just how short-tempered are these guys?!*

One way or another, though, the city was under attack! Meaning we had to defend it!

"Amelia, you and the soldiers handle evacuations! Be careful! Some of the Hounds might have infiltrated the city in the chaos!"

Amelia looked briefly upset by my order, yet she responded firmly, "Very well!"

I knew she would have preferred to take part in the evil-vanquishing directly. But I also knew that if a princess insisted on going to the front lines, the soldiers and local security would insist on going with her instead of getting the civilians to safety. Amelia knew that too, which was why she hadn't rushed out first thing.

You've grown, Amelia. In the old days, she'd have climbed up on the roof of the guesthouse the instant I took my eyes off her to make a dramatic declaration to our opponent.

"Soldiers of Zephilia and Saillune!" she called now, turning to the crowd of

armed men. “Though our nations and ranks may differ, we have a mutual desire to protect the people and keep the peace! With servants of evil upon us, it is our duty to repel them and safeguard this city! Will you lend me your aid?!”

“Aye!” the soldiers cried out as one.

Meanwhile... “Zel! Grab Gourry and follow me! I’m gonna go on ahead!” I said, even as I began reciting an incantation. “Lei Wing!”

The spell lifted me off the terrace. I’d have preferred Gourry and Zel at my side, but my only two options for flight magic were a slow, floaty one and the high-speed one I’d just invoked. The high-speed version was handy when you were in a hurry, but the wind barrier it created made it hard to control. Its max carrying capacity, speed, and altitude were all dependent on the caster’s ability too. It would’ve been a piece of cake with my old magic-enhancing talismans, but trying to carry Gourry without them would limit us to skimming along the ground at a not-so-speedy pace. We probably wouldn’t have even been able to clear the city walls.

Now, Levitation—the floaty flight spell—would let me carry someone with ease, but it had the drawback of being far slower. Hovering around at those speeds was like asking someone to hurl projectiles at you. That was why I’d decided to lead the charge, draw the enemy’s attention, and buy time for Zel to bring Gourry along!

I flew over houses, stores, and workshops before crossing the wall that encircled Atessa. Given the location of the explosions in town, it was easy to guess where the Hounds were. I flew some distance from that area, dismissed my flight spell, and landed in the middle of the forest. Then I began my chant!

Thou who art darker than twilight

Thou who art redder than lifeblood

I swear in thy exalted name

Obscured, deep in the flow of time

And make this pledge to darkness here:

So all those in equal measure—

Fools that they are to block our path—

Shall face destruction unconstrained

Grant me power, and unleash thine!

“Dragon Slave!”

The crimson light I produced concentrated itself in a point in the distance and then—*Fa-bwoom!*—burst outward as sheer destructive power!

My target was the heart of the forest. The timber at ground zero was completely atomized by the blast, while trees around it were bent, broken, or ripped from their roots and sent flying!

Dragon Slave was a spell that, as its dragon-slaying name suggested, packed enough punch to obliterate a small castle. It created a depression—well, more like a crater—the size of a city block, surrounded by destruction. Indifferent to the savagery I’d wrought, I immediately chanted a new spell.

“Fireball!”

The light I unleashed this time smashed into the mowed-down trees and—*Bwoosh!*—exploded, scattering crimson flames everywhere. I followed up with a second round, then a third! It was hard for fire to spread among healthy trees, but if you turned up the heat enough from all sides, you could make it happen. Pitchy smoke rose up as the surrounding trees began to burn.

I don’t think they can ignore this, but... I scanned the surrounding forest with my eyes. *Something’s...*

I thought I saw it. A strange chill ran up my spine. Heeding my anxious gut feeling, I whipped around immediately. Just then—*Krrrshoom!*—a flash of white cut through where I’d just been standing! I looked over to see who’d come to greet me, but all I saw was white mist rolling toward me. I couldn’t make out its conjurer.

The mist just kept expanding, billowing out my way. It soon reached the trees being licked by rising tongues of flame and doused them, immediately reducing the force of the blaze. *Aha...* As Alaina had said, it was a great spell for putting out wildfires. I would have loved to study it, but unfortunately, I didn’t have

time to sit around and marvel at spellcraft.

“What do you think you’re doing?” asked someone hatefully from beyond the mist that now encompassed the area—Tessius.

“Oh, come on,” I replied with an intentionally mocking tone. “It’s okay for you to shoot attack spells at a human city, but unforgivable for humans to torch the woods? Don’t be stupid. Next time you attack the city, I’ll set even more of the forest ablaze.”

If the Hounds’ goal was to take the forest back for the elves, I’d figured that setting a nice swath of the place on fire would get their attention PDQ. And it seemed I was right on the money.

“You will pay for this,” Tessius hissed. “This was our forest to begin with.”

“I dunno about your personal take on the matter, but I hear humans and elves hashed this all out a long time ago.”

I could hear Tessius’s voice get closer. A figure gradually began to take shape in the fog.

A new shiver raced up my back.

The gray figure that appeared through the mist was larger than Tessius—larger than any ordinary human or elf, in fact. It was the size of a lesser demon. Maybe even bigger.

“A small group of elves made that accord. We’re under no obligation to respect it.”

A giant all in gray, its color too cloudy to be called white... As it drew near and I could make out more detail, I realized that its features were somewhat familiar.

This is... gonna be tricky.

I suppressed my inner nervousness as I made the decision to keep provoking him to buy time. “And why should everyone else—elves and humans alike—just listen to whatever *you* say instead?”

“You stupid humans don’t understand the facts. All you do is bray.” The gray giant’s footsteps came to a halt.

I wouldn't have known it was Tessius if not for his voice. Pale gray armor covered his entire body. Two protrusions stuck out from the helmet, resembling antlers or animal ears. Where eyeholes should have been were two sleek crystal stones resembling onyx, and several tentacle-like protrusions sprouted all over the plating here and there.

"I just took what you said and switched the parties around. I'm trying to prove that your logic is inherently faulty."

"Heh. You've got guts to keep rambling after seeing me like this," Tessius proclaimed confidently.

I waved my hands. "Little old me? Naaah. I'm scared out of my wits here. Knees knocking, the whole deal," I said as flippantly as I could.

"You underestimate me. You might think this is just heavy armor, but—"

"Nope, I know it's not." Then I said it. "That's the Zenafa Armor. Or... the Zanaffar?"

My offhand declaration stunned Tessius into silence. Understandably, of course. Who in the world, knowing full well what it was, would speak its name so brazenly?

There was an oft-told legend about the magical beast Zanaffar that destroyed the city of Sairaag 120 years ago. The beast's true form was a living weapon-slash-armor created from knowledge obtained from the mythical magical tome, the Claire Bible.

In the more recent past, a human had created an incomplete replica of the living, magic-resistant Zanaffar. It was worn like armor, but it had a mind of its own. It quickly went out of control and destroyed a city. Gourry and I had had the pleasure of putting that down a few years ago.

But even more recently than that, elves and dragons had used the same basic knowledge to develop the Zenafa Armor as a counter-demon measure. I'd slain an especially high-ranked demon with the help of an elf wearing it.



In terms of appearance, the armor Tessius was wearing looked less like the berserk bestial Zanaffar and more like the magical Zenafa Armor that transformed into a white giant. But a key thing both versions had in common? Attack spells didn't work on them.

So, yeah. This was a very bad matchup for a sorcerer like me. After all, even the Dragon Slave I'd unleashed minutes earlier hadn't made a dent on the thing. We were down the Sword of Light, which had slain the Zanaffar of legend, and I didn't even have access to the spell I'd used to defeat its rampaging cousin from a few years back.

It was all the more reason to keep bluffing. Showing confidence despite knowing how powerful Tessius was might make him think I had an actual countermeasure in mind. And, as expected...

"How do you know about the Zanaffar?! And... what's a Zenafa Armor?" Tessius asked cautiously.

Aha... So he had to be wearing something based on the incomplete version.

"Good question! Oh, just to warn you, if that's the Zanaffar I know, it's gonna be eating you pretty soon." I decided to hit him with a dose of the facts. The Zanaffar we'd fought before consumed its host to facilitate its growth into a ruthless, intelligent beast. But...

"Ahh," Tessius said casually. "When it gains its own will and starts to corrupt the wearer, you mean? We have a talented scholar among us who detected that issue and resolved it in the production stage. Of course, I'm sure mere human techniques can't compare to our elven magic."

That explained a lot. If they'd realized the problem before making their version and their point of reference was a technique used by humans, they'd most likely gotten their hands on the janky version that bizarro cult had made for human use. I'd wondered if the Forest Hounds had learned from their Zanaffar, but they'd actually analyzed it, improved on it, and created this upgraded model. That would certainly explain the sudden burst of activity from the all-but-dead extremist group.

I doubted Zel knew about this. If he had, he would have realized immediately

that he was barking up the wrong tree. He also would've let us know.

Still, fighting this guy is gonna be kind of annoying...

But I kept those thoughts to myself for now. "Ah, so you worked out all the kinks, huh?" I replied with continuing confidence as I racked my brain for potential solutions. Just then...

"What are you doing, Tessius?" asked a new voice from behind the elf.

Erk! As it spoke, something surfaced in the mist—a second gray giant. *You kiddin' me here?* I desperately tried to keep my face neutral.

This giant seemed a little smoother than the horned Zanaffar that Tessius was wearing. There were no noticeable protrusions on its head, and it had only a single large onyx-like eye. Its silhouette was rotund, as if wearing a full-body mantle or robe of some kind. Basically, it was a different type of Zanaffar.

Okay, hang on a minute! They didn't just improve it—they iterated on it?! Guess Tessius wasn't kidding when he said they had a talented scholar among them!

"Sagan! This human knows about the Zanaffar!"

The new arrival didn't seem fazed. "Is that a problem?"

Hearing him talk again, I was able to place his voice. It was the archer who'd attacked me on our way back from town after meeting up with Amelia and Zel.

The archer—rather, the cyclopic Zanaffar wearer named Sagan—raised a hand toward me. "We'd have to kill her sooner or later regardle—"

Vwoosh! Just then, a powerful wind blew and took Sagan's next words with it. The mist danced in swirls, whipping around my hair and cape. I came close to losing my balance and took five or six steps into the wind to steady myself.

When it all died down... Gourry, Zel, and Alaina were by my side!

They made it already?! That sure was fast... Aha, of course! It would've taken a while to get here with magic cast by a human. But cast by an elf? No wonder they were here in no time! *Thanks, Alaina!*

I had to admit I was grateful. Buying time with Tessius was easy enough, but

Sagan didn't seem so easily goaded. Still, our numbers didn't change the fact that we were at a disadvantage.

"What are those?" Zelgadis whispered, glaring at the two giants. Meanwhile...

"Zelgadis... and an elf?!" Our opponents seemed as surprised as we were. Sagan let out a cry of shock and lowered his right hand when he spotted Alaina.

"Why is there an elf on their side?!" Tessius's voice was shaking as well.

But then...

"Why do you think?" Alaina proclaimed unexpectedly. She was shouting in her own voice, without the amplification of the Regulus Discs. Her words echoed through the woods as she glared at the two giants. "Why don't you ask *yourselves* why I might be here?! Why don't you self-centered, self-declared 'defenders of the forest' go back to hiding in the leaves like the social outcasts you are? You dog-foolish hooligans decided to get all riled up and attack humans with your new little toy armors while the rest of the decent elves have to pay the price, which is why I have no choice but to debase myself trying to stop you before you escalate things any further! And after giving me the runaround while I was trying to deal with this quietly, you go and attack the city! It's shocking to me that you find *this* so shocking! If you don't like being rebuked by a fellow elf, drop those silly toys right now and go back under whatever rock you crawled out from in the first place to suck water out from moss!"

A pointed silence fell. Nothing moved but the billowing mist for a time.

Whoa... So Alaina can talk confidently to other elves! And kind of rudely, at that!

Tessius and Sagan, bowled over by her forcefulness, just stood there silently until...

"Tessius."

"Yeah?"

"Let's kill her."

"Agreed."

At this, both giants raised their hands and fired beams of light that tore through the mist! It was the Zanaffars' special laser breath!

"Whaaat?!"

Gourry, Zel, Alaina, and I all cried out at once and dashed to the side, heading for the densest grouping of tree cover possible.

I pulled up alongside the blonde elf and called out to her. "Hey! Alaina!"

She activated the Regulus Discs on her collar to reply, "It doesn't seem like I can convince them!"

"You were trying to *convince* them?! It sounded like you were trying to *provoke* them to me!"

"That's what you were doing before we arrived, isn't it? I heard you!"

"I was trying to buy time! Also, that was mighty big talk from someone so shy!"

"Once I know they're enemies, I don't care what they think of me anymore!"

I knew social anxiety generally stemmed from fear of the judgment of others—but I'd had no idea hers was so selective!

Another beam of light, then another and another, tore through the fog behind us as we ran.

"What *are* those, Lina?!" Zelgadis asked, keeping up the pace.

I replied, likewise booking it, "Magical Beast Zanaffar! A powered-up version!"

"What?!" he cried back in shock.

Gourry, running just as fast, threw in, "You know about it, Zel?!"

"Of course I do! Same as you! It was that white beast we fought with all the tentacles and laser breath and everything!"

"The white... Oh, hey, I remember that!" Gourry recalled with a careless nod.

Zel had been with us when we fought Zanaffar, which had taken the form of a giant white quadruped. It would've been hard to say at a glance that these two giants were related to it in any way. I only recognized them because I'd seen the

perfected Zanaffar, the Zenafa Armor, and the resemblance there was much stronger.

“Zanaffar?!” Alaina cried, overhearing our conversation. “From that human legend?!”

“Yep! Most attack spells do zilch against it!” I warned her.

“Why didn’t you tell me that before I provoked them?!”

“So you *were* trying to provoke them!” I turned to Zel, who was running beside me. “That’s probably why they started acting up out of the blue! Did they ever drop a hint about it when you were around?”

“No! They must have been keeping it from me!” he replied.

Aha... Just as I thought.

“Doesn’t armor of Zanaffar consume its wearer’s will?!” he then asked.

“I told you this was a powered-up version!” I reminded him.

We were running the whole time we were talking, naturally. The laser breath had stopped coming—perhaps because we were amidst tree cover now—but we had every reason to think the two giants were still pursuing us. We couldn’t afford to stop.

It was a full-on yellow-bellied retreat, but I wasn’t about to complain! It would’ve been bad news if Zel or Alaina had tried to tangle with these opponents without knowing about their magic immunity. I’d needed time to fill them in.

“The fact that the elves were able to improve on the Zanaffar probably means they can make it do whatever they want it to! Even though we can’t use spells on them, I’m sure *they* can on *us*!”

“That’s even worse!”

“I agree!”

The hide of the Zanaffar we’d fought previously kept its body cut off from the astral side, meaning most black magic had no effect on the beast. The trade-off was that it couldn’t use magic either. I knew that wasn’t the case for the elves,

however, for a visible reason—the white mist. One of them had to have cast the spell to put out the fire I’d set to lure them. So it stood to reason that their improved Zanaffars, much like the Zenafa Armor, allowed them to regulate connection to the astral side at will.

“What do we do?!” Gourry asked.

I was glad we were drawing the Hounds’ attention away from the city, but we couldn’t keep this game of tag up forever. We needed to find some place to strike back and take them down, one at a time if necessary.

“We’ll draw them into the forest and—”

Before I could finish my sentence, there was a rustling. The forest came alive around us. From the underbrush, from behind the trunks... figures emerged to surround us.

Plant golems? A little fire magic would make a clean sweep of those! “Alaina! Can you dispel the mist?!”

“Temporarily, yes. But there’s a good chance they’ll cast it again immediately.”

“Good enough for me! On my signal!” Before I could see whether she nodded or not, I began my incantation. The plant golems continued to bear down on us all the while. I finished my spell, gave Alaina the signal, and then...

“Disenchant!” she whispered.

The mist around us disappeared like a wave receding from the shore. With my vision cleared, I could see the plant golems closing in on us in great detail. And in addition...

There was something crouching in the tree branches. Four long, thin legs grew from a rotund torso that resembled a large cocoon. Threads—no, tentacles—sprouted from its body here and there, clinging to branches and tree trunks around it, holding the giant in the air. It almost resembled a giant arachnid. Part of the “cocoon” portion was open, almost like its chelicerae, revealing a human face. It looked like a human had been devoured by a massive spider, but it was really...

A third Zanaffar?!

The face belonged to the armor's wearer. He had the trademark attractive elven features, although he looked closer to thirty or forty—in human terms, of course. In actuality, he could have easily been over a hundred years old.

He'd exposed his face to cast a spell for sure. These guys couldn't use magic while completely encased in their Zanaffars, so he'd cracked it open to summon the plant golems. I suspected he'd probably been the one to call them up in the fight where we'd reunited with Amelia and Zel too.

Just as the fog lifted and I could see around me, his mouth moved. "Olgious."

That spell again?!

Instantly, vines sprouted from the plant golems, lashing toward us! Left with no other recourse...

"Flare Arrow!" I released the spell I'd chanted to kill the plant golems on the vines. We couldn't afford to get tangled up in them right now!

The vines streaked at my flaming arrows, and when viridian met vermilion, the green was blasted away while the red was sent flying. In the end, the last of the vines overpowered the fire. But then...

"Flare Arrow!" Zel unleashed his own spell! He burned through almost all of the remaining vines, right into the golems beyond!

Kracka-pop! Any plant golems that took a direct hit were fried. Gourry then cleaned up the last of the vines with his blade. And...

"Zeifrit." The arachnid Zanaffar— Oh, forget it. "Spider" used an incantation, conjuring a gigantic ball of flame that appeared in the space between him and us. The thing took up half my field of vision!

Not good! Was his plan to distract us with the plant golems while he whipped up this little number?!

"Tch!" Gourry chucked a stone at the ball of flame. This strategy was effective at triggering human-cast Fireball spells while en route to their targets, but...

This particular burning ball of flame devoured the stone undeterred, continuing on its course!

Not sparing a second, Alaina tried a spell of her own. “Airplosion.”

Pow! There was an audible burst of air just beneath the approaching fireball. The torrent of air detonated it, and we were left stumbling around in a daze as the blazing tornado washed over us. Through the raging torrent around us, we could hear a voiceless scream ring out.

The air had blown the fireball back, so while we were treated to a blazing-hot wind, Spider had taken the full wrath of the fiery blast—and if his armor was still open at the time, he’d have taken it straight to the face!

Once the flames cleared, we could see Spider in a rage. A sound like a scream whistled around us as his armor’s legs and tentacles tore fruitlessly through the air. He’d lost his balance and hit the ground, where he continued to writhe. Dude was clearly in serious pain.

Gourry wasn’t about to miss this chance! Even if a Zanaffar could block attack magic, that didn’t mean it was immune to physical attacks. And Spider couldn’t so much as see at the moment! Gourry dove skillfully through the wildly swinging tentacles and raised his sword, but before he could bring it down... he turned and sliced through empty air instead!

What in the—

“Impossible!” Sagan shouted from a good distance away.

“It can’t be!” I heard Alaina shout in surprise from right beside me.

I wasn’t sure what had just happened, but I assumed it had to have been an attack from Tessius and Sagan. I turned to see two figures coming toward us. From afar, I could recognize Sagan’s Cyclops armor, partially opened. I was sure he was going to use some kind of spell, but then...

“Lukoria?!” Tessius, whose armor I’ll call “Horns,” shouted when he saw his writhing friend. (Lukoria was presumably Spider guy.) Horns then fired off a shot of laser breath to drive us away from Spider, keeping us from finishing the job!

Okay! Time to make the most of the situation! I’ll make it look like I’m gonna try to finish off Spider and attack another of these guys instead! If all goes well, I could end the whole—

As I was mid-thought, a set of wings blocked out the blue sky visible through the canopy. *Vabwabwabwabwoosh!* When it did, streaks of light rained down all around us!

Was that... laser breath?! Thankfully, none of it had hit us, but was that winged thing a *fourth* Zanaffar?! *How many of them are there?!*

This was the best shot we'd have at finishing off Spider, but if our foe had aerial units in their ranks, we couldn't chance it. We could end up dead for our troubles.

"Retreat!" I shouted.

"Right!" Gourry responded.

"Foggul." Alaina produced a new wave of white mist. I had no doubt it would both quench the remnants of Lukoria's fiery blast and help shield us from the enemy's sight.

"Alaina! Is there anywhere for us to hide out other than the city?" I asked her.

"This way!" She turned and we followed, fleeing into the mist.

Our magical lights illuminated earthen walls covered in moss. The air around us was cool and crisp, and the earth below us was largely odorless.

"I don't think they'll find us here," Alaina said as we arrived in a slightly more open space.

"This place..." I looked all around, although nothing was especially surprising. There were just a few mossy pillars supporting a roof and walls. "Is this an old mine shaft?"

"Yes. I found it when I was searching for their base," she said with a nod.

After we'd fled the scene, the Hounds hadn't given chase. Perhaps they'd prioritized saving Lukoria, the Spider wearer, or perhaps they'd just lost sight of us in the mist. Either way, Alaina had gotten us to safety here.

The abandoned shaft looked quite old. The entrance was half buried and hidden by underbrush, and if Alaina hadn't pointed it out, I never would have realized it was there. In fact, if you'd asked me to find it again on my own a day

and a half later, I doubt I could have.

Alaina took in a small breath. “Lina.” She fixed her eyes on mine and walked straight at me.

Well, here we go... I met her gaze and gritted my teeth. Alaina then suddenly averted her eyes, spun on her heel, and walked right back the way she’d come.

“Wait a minute.” I grabbed her shoulder from behind.

“Wh-What is it, Lina?”

“C’mon! You were radiating ‘Destroying the forest just to distract Tessius is unforgivable! I’m going to give you an earful!’ energy! Why’d you chicken out?!”

“Your eyes were scary.”

“I didn’t do any of that for fun, okay? I figured I’d deserve a good slap after the fact!”

“Oh... I could never slap you, Lina. What if I broke my hand?”

“You wouldn’t, damn it! What do you think my head’s made of? Er, anyhoo... I knew you wouldn’t like it, but it was the only way I could think of to get the Hounds away from the city. I apologize. I really am sorry,” I said genuinely.

“I’m glad you’re repentant... Ah. Of course, that doesn’t excuse you from burning any more of the forest in the future!”

“I won’t, I won’t!” I said, frantically waving my hands. The forest was an important resource to more than just the elves. The city of smiths also depended on it for its livelihood. I’d done what I’d had to do in the moment, but it’s not like I get off on committing arson, y’know?

“Speaking of fire... that Spider guy conjured those plant golems to get us to dispel the mist, then used the opportunity to cast that big ball o’ flame. Are elves okay with that kind of thing?”

“I’m sure he intended to put the fire out right after he finished us off, but... Well, everyone has their own moral compass. There are elves who can’t stand the idea of snapping a single twig, and there are those who can turn a blind eye to all manner of things if they serve the greater good. I’m personally rather

opposed to the idea of fire in the forest.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to harm the forest either, but if it’s the only way to put a check on the Forest Hounds... I said I’d torch more of it if they attacked the city again, so I think they’ll prioritize me over Atessa for now.”

“But that also means we can’t return to the city,” Zelgadis put in. “If they realize we’re there...”

“They’ll blow us away *with* the city. Nice and efficient, from their point of view,” I said, scratching my head.

If Tessius and his group had wanted to, they could have started with Zanaffar laser breath a-go-go and reduced Atessa to rubble. There were likely two reasons they hadn’t done that in their earlier attack. One was that their goal wasn’t destruction; it was to frighten the humans into abandoning the city. The other was that razing the city outright would likely turn all of humankind against them. But now that I’d threatened their precious forest, there was a real danger that they’d level the place—and us right along with it.

“So we’ll have to squat here for a while and sneak back to town from time to time to restock... or something like that. Obviously there’s a chance they’ll find us here after a few days, and they’re bound to be scouring the forest in the meantime. Staying too long could be trouble.”

“Couldn’t we just leave the area?” Alaina asked. “If they won’t attack the city until they find you, we could keep them in check indefinitely by simply going somewhere they’ll never find us.”

“I thought of that too... But if they find out we’ve scarpered, they’ll attack the city on the spot. Which means fleeing’s not an option.”

“You think we stand a chance here?” Zelgadis asked.

I nodded. “The reason Team Tessius started causing trouble after so long on the down-low is because they got their Zanaffars. So if we *defeat* those Zanaffars, destroy them, or otherwise prove they’re not the insta-win button they think they are, the Hounds should back down. Zanaffars are scary, but they’re not invincible. Attack spells won’t work on them when they’re all sealed up, but they’ll have to open up if they want to use attack spells of their own.

Plus, any physical attacks that'll overpower the armor entity itself should still get through. That rules out normal swords, of course... but Gourry's just might do the trick."

"Me?" Gourry, who'd been spacing out, suddenly looked my way when he heard his name.

"Yeah. That guy we fought before... Could you bust his armor without killing him?"

I knew that asking if he could *kill the armor* sounded ridiculous on its face, but for a man of his skill with a sword like that? It wasn't impossible.

"Well... I wouldn't know until I tried, but it does look pretty tough."

"Speaking of which..." Alaina spoke. Hiding behind me, she peeked over at Gourry. "Master... Gourry, was it? How did you cut through that earlier attack from the astral side?"

...

"What?!" Zel and I cried out simultaneously.

Gourry cut through an astral attack?! If you didn't already know, the astral side of reality—the astral plane—is like the flip side of the material world we inhabit. When we talk about casting spells, we're actually talking about drawing upon that plane's magical power to manifest various effects. It was a realm humans couldn't normally perceive, but...

"You cut through it?!" I found myself asking.

Gourry just looked at me in confusion. "Asral Sai? Who's that?"

"It's not a person, dude. It's—"

"Remember when you were about to slay the spider-like giant?" Alaina asked, still hiding behind me. "The cyclops one targeted you from behind, but you sliced through the attack with your sword."

I recalled the way Gourry had whipped around to slash at nothing instead of sealing the deal with Spider guy.

"Oh, that?" Gourry said casually. "I just had this instinct, like, 'I'd better cut

through here.' Did I cut something?"

How am I supposed to answer that, man?

"You did," Alaina insisted.

He did?!

It was true that Cyclops armor had been open at the time. I remembered seeing Sagan's face. I'd assumed he was preparing to cast a spell, but perhaps it was the opposite—he'd just finished mounting an astral assault.

"Think of it like slicing through an invisible arrow. But I thought humans couldn't perceive astral phenomena... so how did you do it?"

"Well, it's like..." Gourry pantomimed holding his sword. "I drew my sword to finish off that spidery guy, but then I felt like it was being tugged in that direction... so I thought, 'Oh, I bet there's something I need to cut there.'"

I wasn't sure if that was the explanation of a master or a dunce. But hey, Gourry was both.

"Asking for a friend here," I piped up. "What happens if a human gets hit by one of those astral attacks?"

Alaina responded casually, "In the best-case scenario, you'd be rendered unconscious. But more commonly, it would annihilate your spirit."

"Freaky! Is it possible to avoid that?"

"Yes, if you dodge it."

"Dodge it? But... if humans can't see it..." Obviously, there was virtually no way for a human to perceive the goings-on on the astral plane. I couldn't say there was *no way at all*, but certainly nothing you could do mid-combat.

"Ah... I suppose that's true."

"Is there any way to *let* us see it?"

"Elves can see it innately, so I'm afraid I wouldn't know... Ah, I know. It does take quite a while to prepare an attack from the astral side. If you're constantly on the move, it'd be quite difficult to land a hit from a distance."

Constantly on the move? It sounded like the grand strategy amounted to

“scramble like mad and hope like hell it misses.”

“I... I see.” Yet as absurd as astral attacks were, Gourry had cut through one. How had he done that?

Ah... He said it felt like something tugging at his sword. I wonder...

“Alaina!” I exclaimed as something suddenly dawned on me. “Gourry’s sword has a bit of a history. He actually had a dragon cast a spell on the blade to blunt it. As an elf, it should be possible for you to remove that seal... Could you try?”

“There’s a seal... to blunt the sword?” Alaina asked in confusion.

Yeah, I guess that sounds pretty weird out of context...

“Apparently the cutting power of its edge increases in response to magic in its surroundings. So—this is just a theory—but I’m wondering if that fundamental property of the sword reacted to the powerful magic of the astral attack, which made Gourry feel like it was being pulled in that direction.”

Alaina turned thoughtful at my explanation. “That... might be possible? I couldn’t confirm or deny it at this stage... but he *did* cut through the attack, so...”

“Theorizing aside, the sharpness of the sword gives it a bad habit of cutting through sheaths, which is why we asked a dragon to blunt it. But if we restore its full power... I don’t know if that would help it detect astral attacks or not, but it should at least let it cut through Zanaffar armor. So...”

“I should be able to remove such a seal, but not without tools. And I left all my things at the inn in town...”

“Understood. Then come nightfall, we’ll sneak back into town to get our stuff while Tessius’s gang is none the wiser, right? We also need to fill the others in on what’s happened, and we’d probably better check in on the damage as well.”

Everyone agreed to my suggestion.

I had the feeling I’d be going without a fluffy bed and a warm meal for a while, but hey, it was all the more reason to beat down those jerks as fast as we could! I was burning with a newfound will to defeat the Forest Hounds. I

wanted my creature comforts back ASAP!

I looked up and saw the starry sky through the branches. I looked back down and saw the night-cloaked forest as an unblemished curtain of darkness.

No, not unblemished—there was a single tiny light among the trees. It proceeded through the pathless woods, swaying slowly. Three faces of the lantern were covered, leaving but a single point of flickering orange light that barely lit the way but still stood out in the pitch black of night.

Perhaps because my vision was limited, everything around me felt louder. The leaves of trees rustled in the wind. Unknown birds and insects sang.

I didn't know how far from town the lantern's bearer had come, but when the faint light finally stopped, it had reached an evenly spaced row of trees about the height of children. Probably the most recent replanting after a harvest.

More time passed. Before long...

"What happened?" came a woman's whispering voice a short distance away from the light.

"The city... was attacked," replied a man's hushed voice from closer to the lantern. The light slowly approached the source of the woman's voice. "There were casualties."

At last, the lantern illuminated a humanoid figure—a woman wearing curiously shaped armor. Her face in the night was astonishingly beautiful, and a reflection of the lamplight danced in her eyes.

"I heard... elves did it," the man with the lantern continued. "It can't be true, right? You said you'd help us."

"We elves aren't a monolith. I *am* helping you, but the elves targeting the city are different. Still, I knew that if I told you who they were, you'd stop trusting me. That's why I didn't say anything."

"Then... you really are on my side?" The man's voice became plaintive.

"Yes. Believe in me. I'll help you any way I can."

"Okay. I trust you."

“Thank you. Now, in order for me to be of assistance, could you give me more detailed information? When the city was attacked, there were people who looked like mercenaries who fought the elves. Who are they?”

“Oh, they’re just traveling—”

Interrupting the man’s response—“Don’t trust her, stupid! Freeze Arrow!”—I let fly my spell, unable to abide any more of what I was seeing.

A dozen arrows of cold streaked toward the woman!

“?!” Realizing she couldn’t dodge them, she swept out her right hand. When she did, part of the armor she was wearing transformed. It became a massive shield to block my icy bolts.

“What?! Ah? Er?”

As the man with the lantern yelped in surprise, Gourry ran at the woman. Yet before he could get into sword range, she jumped. No... she flew! When she leaped up, her armor unfolded and transformed. The shield transformed into wings, and she took off into the night sky!

The “Wings” Zanaffar?!

We readied ourselves for battle, but our opponent didn’t seem to be in the mood. She just continued flying off. Gourry sheathed his sword, walked up to the man she’d left behind, took his lantern, and turned it on him. Illuminated by the flickering orange light was...

“It’s you...” Here, I fell silent.

It’s not that I was shocked by his identity—I just couldn’t remember his name right away. It was the guy from the local security task force. You know. Uhhh... Randa, I think?

We’d been on our way back to Atessa, navigating by the light of the moon and stars, to grab our gear and touch base with our people. But just before hitting the city, we’d spotted someone sneaking out by lantern light. We’d followed them, which is how we happened upon the scene just described.

“What in the world are you doing?” I asked.

“Huh... You guys? What’s going on?” He looked around in confusion, unable

to comprehend the situation.

We didn't have a choice. "We can't talk here. Let's get your story back at the inn," I sighed.

We could hear the distant commotion of Atessa's nightlife.

After returning to the Silver Leaf Inn, we'd checked in with MacLyle and gathered in Gourry's room on the third floor. It was a fairly big room, but it was still meant for one, and now it had to hold me, Gourry, Zel, Alaina, MacLyle, and Randa. Six whole people. Yeah, you could say it was a little cramped.

It would've been easier to talk in the first-floor eatery, but there were other customers around. No guarantee that we could go without prying ears.

I began by giving a brief rundown of what we'd been up to. I told them we'd headed out to lure away the Hounds attacking the city, but they'd pulled out the big guns, forcing us to hide out for a while. Then, on our way back, we'd caught Randa meeting up with that elf woman... Naturally, I didn't mention the legendary name Zanaffar. Nevertheless, by the time I'd finished my quick and dirty recounting of events, Randa seemed to fully grasp the gravity of the situation. He'd turned noticeably paler in the lamplight.

"So," I said, looking at him, "how'd you meet her and what were you doing together?"

"I had no idea until you brought it up today," Randa said hoarsely, his eyes studiously averted. "I never thought... the people attacking the town would be elves..."

According to his fumbling explanation, back when everyone thought the raiders attacking the city were plain old bandits, he'd gotten injured falling into a trap while he was patrolling the forest for clues. Apparently, an elf who called herself Lucida had come to his rescue there.

"I come to the forest from time to time myself, but lately bandits have been appearing nearby... I suspect they're the ones who set that trap. I'd like to drive them out of this place," she'd said, and Randa had believed her. She'd then proposed that they work together. *"We'll share information periodically and use*

it to outflank the bandits. But if rumor about me gets out in town, the bandits might come after me, so you can't tell a soul about this."

It was a pretty fishy story in hindsight, and there was a good chance the trap Randa had fallen into had really been set by Tessius's gang.

"I just never thought elves would do such a thing," Randa whispered tearfully.

The conflict between humans and elves over the forest was long over by the time he was born, and humans generally thought of elves as the intellectual, non-aggressive sort. It would've been asking too much for him to catch on to Lucida's shiftiness immediately.

There was a possibility that Alaina, another elf, had also been sent into the city for reconnaissance—but I personally didn't buy it. The reason was simple: external shyness and internal braggadocio were a bad combination for any spy. If the enemy was stupid enough to send someone like her to infiltrate the town, this whole ordeal would've been over and done with before Gourry and I ever arrived in Atessa.

"Hey." Randa looked up, pleadingly, at Zel. "Is she... Lucida... Is she really with them? It's not just some mistake?"

"No mistake," Zel declared firmly. "She's part of Tessius's gang. Probably using you to gather intel on the city. We caught sight of her armor in a fight, and Tessius would only give that armor to people he trusts. I know because he didn't trust me, and he didn't even tell me that he had it."

We'd only caught a glimpse of Wings in the forest fight, and hadn't seen the wearer's face, but it was safe to assume she was with the Hounds.

"Then..." Randa began with a grim expression, "I was completely taken in... and I leaked information about the city to the very people trying to destroy it! That's why they were always one step ahead of us..."

His despair was understandable. I recalled how shaken he'd been when he'd learned we were up against elves. He was having trouble processing the fact that he'd been deceived. But even so...

"What... What am I supposed to—"

“No one cares!” I delivered a chop to his head as I yelled. *Crack!*

“Whaaaaaaaat?!” Everyone else shouted in surprise for some reason.

I ignored their baffling reaction and continued on. “We don’t have time to listen to your whining! You can worry about making amends after this is all over! What we have to think about right now is what to do next!”

“What? Um... well, I guess, but...?” Randa muttered, clearly confused.

“If you really want to take responsibility, get it together and help us put an end to this! Your punishment will be up to MacLyle! The end! Now...” I took a look around the room. “I told the Hounds I’d torch the forest if they attacked the city again, so if we stay here, they’re bound to attack for sure. So we’re gonna grab what we need, get outside of town, and stay on the move. Master MacLyle, please let Amelia know.”

“Could you tell us where you’re going?” MacLyle asked.

I shook my head. “If we tell anyone, there’s a chance the enemy will hear of it and send someone after us, so mum’s the word. We’ll initiate any communication from here on out. Do you think you could stock us up on rations?”

“Of course... Oh, and I have news as well,” MacLyle said. “After learning of our enemy’s identity and the attack on the city, the mayor put in an official request to Zephilia for aid. But even if they dispatch troops right away, they’ll take over ten days to arrive.”

“Ten days?” I frowned. “Seems a little fast.” That was about how long it took just to get to the capital from here. “Wouldn’t sending a messenger to the capital and then dispatching soldiers would take way longer?”

“It would. But apparently our local sorcerers’ council has a room where they can contact the sorcerers’ council in the capital, so they used that to explain the situation. Though we’re still awaiting an official reply.”

“Okay, got it,” I said. That made sense. Even a town without an official guard had to have *some* preparations in place to call for aid when needed. “Oh, and tomorrow, send a follow-up message about the powerful armor they’ve got. Specifically, that they can fire laser beam attacks and our attack spells don’t

work on them.”

“Bfffffft!” My unvarnished infodump caused MacLyle to spit out his tea. “Are you serious?”

“Why would I joke about that?”

“Can we really fight them?!”

“Do we have another choice?”

“V-Very well... I’ll let the capital know. Is there anything we can do? I can rally the local security force if you need.”

“Not right now,” I responded. “I don’t think force of numbers is going to convince Tessius’s gang to back off.” On the contrary, sending waves of men after the Zanaffars was a good way to end up with a lot of dead men and no fewer Zanaffars. “But I might still ask for your aid depending on how things unfold, so please be on standby.”

“Of course. I’ll do anything I can,” MacLyle agreed firmly.

I was glad to have reinforcements from Zephilia on the way. If possible, I would’ve loved to leave the whole affair in their hands... but the soldiers had never fought a Zanaffar before, and I had my doubts about how much resistance they could mount. Now, if someone like my sister decided to drop in, she’d have it all wrapped up by lunchtime the next day. Still, the bigger problem was whether, even with my threat to check them, Tessius and his gang would really give us those ten days.

I could only imagine they were expecting the eventual arrival of backup on the city’s behalf. And that being the case... there was a chance they’d attack sooner rather than later.

We heard the blade slide out of its sheath, and then a faint purple light appeared in the darkness. It wasn’t a reflection of the magic lights on the walls; the sword itself was faintly glowing.

“Is this...” Was it just my imagination, or was Alaina’s whisper even more hushed than usual? “What...?”

“I told you. The sword responds to magic power by getting sharper,” I responded.

After we’d finished our conversation with MacLyle and the others in town, we’d gathered our things, departed Atessa, and returned to the abandoned mine we’d made our base camp. Obviously, we’d been careful to make sure we weren’t followed.

Inside the chilly, damp shaft, our lamps illuminated carpets and tapestries of moss. We’d shared a meal of jerky and bread, then after a breather, I’d asked Alaina to remove the seal on Gourry’s sword.

She set down the bag she’d brought from the inn and got to work. Gourry, Zel, and I kept watch around us.

Alaina silently removed Gourry’s sword from its sheath, and the blade drew our gazes instinctively. “I understand the principle... but what is this spell-writing?”

“Spell-writing?”

“It’s right there on the blade... Oh, right, humans can’t read it.”

Which suggests the writing is associated with the astral side somehow...

“Does it look like words to elf eyes? All I see is a faint purple glow...”

“I’m not sure how to describe it. It’s like there are several layers of words, thinner and finer than threads of hair, written upon it... I understand that magic power makes its blade sharper, but it’s so very intricate... It truly is a remarkable weapon.”

You’re telling me...

I was intentionally avoiding saying it, but Gourry just put in casually, “I think he said it was called the Blast Sword?”

“What?!” Alaina looked up and stared at Gourry. “The legendary blade? But... this is...” She then looked back down at the sword. “Yes... It very well may be...”

“My last sword was the Sword of Light, though.”

“You must be joking... or lying,” Alaina said without a glance back at him. I

suppose her skepticism was reasonable, though.

“So?” I asked. “Can you remove the seal on its edge?”

“I believe I can. Whoever placed the seal intended for it to be removed,” she said as she took a few things from her bag and lined them up around her.

A spool of thread. A bottle of some kind of medicine. Small crystals... judging from the color, probably celestite. Some kind of bone fragments. Dried herbs. Even someone like me, who knew a whole lot about magic, didn’t recognize a lot of what she was using.

I was about to witness an elven magical technique. I didn’t even know if humans could do what she did, but my sorcerer’s curiosity was through the roof. I wanted to draw in closer to watch, but I didn’t want to make Alaina so nervous she messed up. So I just watched silently in the penumbra of the lamplight.

She removed the lid from the small bottle and placed a pinch of its contents on her left index finger. It looked like powder. I’d have liked to ask about it, but I stayed quiet lest I interrupt her work.

She took the spool of thread in her right hand, then brought her left index finger and thumb together to apply the powder to it. The powder-covered thread ran between her fingers... Normally it would have dipped down on the other side, but instead, wreathed in a pale purple glow—the same glow that wreathed the Blast Sword—it traveled through the air without support, touched the blade, and...

“The thread disappeared?” Gourry asked.

Alaina responded, her eyes fixed on the thread and the blade. “It didn’t disappear. The thread is weaving itself into the words of the spell.”

“I see...” Gourry nodded along, even though he clearly didn’t understand at all.

“I’m just using a mediator to fuse the thread to the words of the spell so that I can extract them.”

“Just,” huh? It sounded like she was saying she was stitching the writing so it

would disappear when she removed the thread... but the very idea seemed like total nonsense to me.

Alaina added more powder to her finger and sent more thread into the spell. I don't know how many times she repeated that mundane-looking ritual until...



At last, she stopped and let out a tiny sigh. She used her right hand to take the cap off of another bottle and tilted it over the thread in her hand. A thick, red liquid oozed from the container, slowly cresting the lip and spilling a single drop onto the thread.

Vermilion light raced through it instantly. The liquid must have reacted with the powder in the thread. The thread, now aglow with red light, instantly elongated, tracing across the glowing blade, causing the delicate patterns—or maybe words—glowing in crimson to rise up.

Alaina whispered something. It was probably a spell, but it didn't use any of the chaos words I knew, so I didn't understand it. Then, instantly...

Plink.

With the tiniest of sounds, the vermillion pattern burst away from the blade. The light in the air grew stronger for a short moment before vanishing into the dark of the cave, leaving only an afterimage burned into our eyes. At the same time, the faint purple shine of the blade became clearly, if subtly, brighter.

"That should do it." Alaina looked at me and nodded. "Try it."

"Take it away, Gourry."

"Sure!" Gourry stepped forward, took the sword by the hilt, looked around, and walked over to a rock the size of my fist sitting in a corner of the cave. He touched the blade to the rock to get a sense for the feel of it, and... "Hmm..." He unceremoniously moved his arm.

Kwip. With a sound like a knife through an apple, the rock split in two.

Jeez... That thing really is too dang sharp.

Gourry gazed intently at the blade. "This'll cut through the sheath if I sheathe it, won't it?"

Alaina, watching the spectacle, said, "Was the person who made that sword rather stupid, perchance?"

"I've been wondering that myself."

You saw that sometimes with artisans. They'd master their crafts to such a

degree that, in an attempt to truly test their limits, they'd make things utterly unusable in the day-to-day. There was nothing left even in legend to tell us who'd made the Blast Sword, but I had a feeling they were *that* kind of person. The sword was so sharp it actually made it harder to wield, which was probably why it had been hidden inside the blade of another sword when we'd first found it. Kind of defeating the point, one could say...

"I think this will be able to cut through Zanaffar armor, but I wish he didn't have to hold it unsheathed the whole time," I said.

Alaina thought a while. "What if I were to place spell-writing on the sheath to blunt its contents? Then it would stop slicing the sheath while inside."

"Great idea! Can you do that, Alaina?!"

"Shall I do it right now?"

"Thank you! Please! Gourry, hand me the sheath! Then hold the sword until it's done!"

Alaina changed the lineup of her rocks, then returned the leaves and bones to their bags and replaced them with a different set of leaves and twigs.

...

"By the way, Alaina, a question. Do the rocks and leaves and stuff do anything? You didn't use them."

"Pardon?" A shocked expression flashed across her face. She then said, "Oh... yes, I place them to create a ritual magic circle."

"You do *what*?!" She'd said something so incredible so casually that I found myself shouting in response.

See, we humans had ritual magic circles too, but they required a variety of special materials and magic concoctions mixed into an ink then painted in a circle of specified size. You also had to have various magical objects placed around it. But she was saying that she could—pardon the expression—throw some random crap together to do the same thing? Really, to do it even *better*?

"And once the circle is complete, elves can 'see' it, right?"

"Yes, of course. Though until it's complete, it's just rocks and grass."

I thought a minute, then made a proposal I felt sure would be impossible. “Here’s another question... Could you use a magic circle like that to significantly enhance someone’s magic power?”

“I could with the proper space and the necessary tools,” she responded easily.

“You could?!”

“Yes. But even if I enhance your magical power, Lina, if you leave the circle, the effect will naturally extinguish. It would only boost the power of attack spells you cast while inside the circle.”

“Yeah, I get that. To tell you the truth, I used to have talismans that enhanced my magical power, but stuff happened and I lost ’em. So I’ve got a whole lotta spells I can’t use now. If I could whip those out, even under such limited circumstances, I think they’d come in mighty handy. Now, there are a few other things I wanna ask you...”

There was still no guarantee I could use the spells I was thinking of, but if I could, it’d be a huge boon.

For a while after that, I talked Alaina’s ear off with questions about elf magic...

4: Standing Silently in the Forest of Discord

A winged form passed through the azure above. If I hadn't known better, I'd have pegged it for some kind of bird.

"Is it gone?" Zel asked from where he was hiding behind a tree.

"I can't see it anymore," Gourry responded.

"Okay, let's go," I concluded.

The group nodded in agreement and went back on the move.

It was now several days after our surreptitious stop in town. We'd left the mine shaft we'd been using as a base and were currently going deeper into the forest. The wind rustled the grass and leaves... Then suddenly, the birdsong and insect noise went silent.

It's coming! Just as I thought that, a beam of light flew at us from the distance—a Zanaffar's laser breath! It speared me right through the chest.

In the same instant, Alaina activated a spell. "Foggul!" Her magic filled the air around us with white mist, and I (my chest still pierced) disappeared along with the rest of our group.

I'm sure I don't need to spell this out, but the impaled Lina was just an illusion.

This was another of Alaina's little numbers. Functioning much like a mirage, the spell projected objects elsewhere in three dimensions. It was quite a popular trick with the elves, who used it to project fake giant monsters in order to scare away bandits or dangerous animals. The illusions could even move, and while you could tell something was off about them up close, they were pretty convincing from a distance.

To Tessius and the others, it looked like they'd just nailed one of us with their laser breath and we'd raised a smoke screen to hide in response. They would naturally close in to confirm the kill afterward—and that was when we'd strike.

After all, the whole reason we'd left our hiding spot today was to bait the Hounds into attacking.

The moment the area was covered in white fog, me and my three companions broke into a sprint toward the laser breath's point of origin.

Here's the skinny on what was going down. Wings had spotted us, the Hounds had surrounded us at a distance, and then used that single long-range attack as their signal to descend on us. Meanwhile, our counterstrategy was using Alaina's illusion to lure them out, then conjuring her fog for cover while we dogpiled on each one of the Hounds in turn.

Our first target was whoever had fired at us. I knew the Hounds had a sniper—the guy who'd shot a bow at us through the fog before—so I figured the most likely candidate was the Cyclops-wearing Sagan.

As the four of us ran toward his location, I noticed movement in my peripheral vision. There was something in the fog. *A bird?* The small silhouette moved as if flying parallel to us...

"Dodge!" I screamed, and we all leaped to different sides.

Vrm! A flash of light raced through where we'd just been—more laser breath!

"Gourry! Slice through any of those weird-looking birds you see!"

"Got it!" The big lug immediately seemed to spot something and slashed sideways with his sword. A pale purple light traced an afterimage in the fog, and the whatever-it-was hit the ground hard.

"What did you just cut through?!" I shouted.

"A gray... bird?" he replied. "But there's no blood!"

"That's fine! Slash at anything else like that you see!"

"What's going on?!" Zel asked.

"I think Cyclops has drones!" I answered. "He's using them to locate us!"

I'd wondered before how Sagan had been able to achieve such precise aim through the thick fog. I'd assumed at first that he'd employed forest critters as familiars, hiding them in the trees to ascertain our location. But the way the

Zanaffar armor cut its wearer off from the astral side would make it impossible to use familiars in such a way. Each elven Zanaffar had been designed for its wearer, however, so I reasoned Sagan's might have a similar function built in. Artificial "drones" could easily take the place of familiars for recon purposes. Granted, that was all speculation on my part... but this development seemed to clinch the theory.

We continued to race through the underbrush. Each time Gourry swung his sword, one of Cyclops's drones hit the ground. I wasn't sure if it was harder for Sagan to aim through the trees or if Gourry's drone-slashing was doing the trick, but we hadn't seen a second volley of laser breath yet.

One way or another, discovering that Gourry could cut through the drones—which were likely made of the same material as the Zanaffars—was a huge boon to us.

With no warning—*Whoom!*—we heard an explosion from overhead. Cyclops had opened up and fired something into the sky to let his allies know he was under threat. As for what that meant for us...

"This way!" I pointed and took off in a random direction. Immediately picking up what I was putting down, the rest of my group followed suit and Alaina generated more fog to keep us screened from our opponents.

See, if we'd stayed en route to Cyclops, he probably would've moved to hide—leaving us to walk into an ambush from his buddy Zanaffars. That was why I'd figured it was better to change course, but just as we did...

Thunka-thunk-thunk! Thunka-thunk-thunk! Thunka-thunk-thunk!

We heard something swiftly approaching us from the side. The rhythmic thunder of the footsteps was reminiscent of a horse. Obviously, there was no way an ordinary horse was running around the forest at a time like this. It was safe to assume it was an equine Zanaffar.

"Zel, ground! Gourry, sword! Alaina, ready!"

"Right!"

"Got it!"

“What? What?!”

Everyone except Alaina reacted immediately. Zel and I ducked behind trees as we began chanting, while Gourry turned toward the hoofbeats and readied his blade. After a moment of panic, Alaina slipped into the nearby underbrush to hide, and not a second too soon.

Thunka-thunk-thunk! The thunderous footsteps drew nearer, and a figure emerged from the fog. It had the silhouette of a centaur—a great horse with a human torso where the head would usually be. It carried a lance-like weapon in each of its hands. When this Centaur Zanaffar laid eyes on us...



“Humaaans!” it howled in a male voice as it charged forward even faster than before! Even the density of the trees around us didn’t slow it down... It actually accelerated as it approached!

That thing’s faster than I thought! I placed my hand on the ground, and...
“Bepheth Bring!”

Bepheth Bring was a spell used for digging tunnels, so if you pointed it straight into the ground below you, you could basically make an instant pit trap!

Then it was Zel’s turn. “Dug Haute!” he incanted, his spell conjuring spires of earth.

I thought we could slow Centaur down enough with our one-two spell combo for Gourry to take off one of its legs... However, it’s always important to expect the unexpected, and Centaur was closing in *way* faster than expected!

I’ll never forget what happened next. The scene that played out before me seemed to pass in slow-motion, searing itself into my brain.

The Centaur’s forelegs hit the hole in the ground my spell had created. And just as its front half dropped inward, Zel’s earthen spire shot up into the horse’s stomach. Naturally, it wasn’t strong enough to pierce the Zanaffar armor, and as a result...

Wooow, serious hang time!

“Aaaah!” Centaur shouted as it was arced into the air, head over heels!

“Wait?! Huh?! What?!” Even Gourry, shocked by this development, quickly backed up. Then, as the armor tumbled back downward—*Slash!*—Gourry struck.

Centaur hit the ground behind him. *Fwoomabangkrickle!* The sound of that impact, man... I mean, the guy was an enemy and all, but I still couldn’t help wincing in sympathy.

We all stood there in a moment of silence.

But Centaur, apparently still conscious, moved slightly. “You...!”

“Take this!”

Ah. Alaina with the double-tap!

Vwooosh! A giant spear—no, more like a battering ram—morphed from the ground at her behest and sent Centaur flying high again. As it did, I saw the human torso rip right off the rest of the armor.

Gourry's slash had probably nearly severed the armor, then the force of the landing plus Alaina's final push had finished the job, tearing it asunder. It was funny, in a way, but I felt too sorry for the guy to laugh. I wasn't sure if we should count this as a stroke of good luck for us or a major case of misfortune for him. We were fighting and all, but damn...

The bisected Centaur clattered to the ground. The group stared at it for a moment, and then...

"Urgh..." We heard its wearer groan.

Ah, right. The wearer was only inside the torso and the horse's forelegs! Thus, cleaving Centaur at the waist hadn't actually harmed whoever was inside.

Realizing this, we braced for combat again. Gourry ran at him.

"Don't underestimate me, humaaans!" the front half of Centaur shouted as it... continued lying there, splayed on the ground and twitching.

Startled by the strangeness of this behavior, Gourry slowed his charge and kept his distance.

"This is nothing! As long as I have... the power of Zanaffar... I'll never... Ah, why is it so heavy?!"

As I watched the guy struggle, I realized something. "Hey, dude inside the armor!" I called. He stopped moving then, so I figured he'd heard me. "You know that the Zanaffar's a living thing, right? So when the armor kicks the bucket, you're outta luck!"

In other words, he wasn't going anywhere, much less firing any more laser breath.

"What?" the guy asked blankly. He struggled a little longer, and then... "Damn it! In that case..."

Krsh! The armor burst open. It was apparently designed with an emergency

release mechanism that could activate even if the Zanaffar died. Its wearer, released from within, stood up slowly. He turned to face us, and...

Splat! I planted the heel of my boot smack in his face with a flying kick!

After I laid the guy out, Zel got a look at him. “Cashdial?!” he cried in shock. It sounded like it was someone he knew from his time infiltrating the Forest Hounds.

“He’s one of them, right?” I asked.

“Yes. He’s quite skilled... This must be quite an embarrassment for him.”

“Yeah...” You could say that again.

Gourry looked a little puzzled. “Um... So, what do we do now? I don’t wanna just, like, murder the guy.”

“Hmm. Yeah.” I wasn’t exactly sure what to do with him either. I knew how Gourry felt, although it *was* going to be a pain in the neck if this Cashdial dude woke up and started chucking attack spells at us. But before we could discuss the matter any further...

“Mind Rasp!” *Thunk!* Alaina hit the unconscious elf with a dose of magic.

“Hey!”

“Erm, that spell deals damage to the spirit,” she explained before I could muster an argument. “He probably won’t wake up for a few days, and once he does, he won’t be able to use magic very well.”

Aha, so it’s a little like Elemekia Lance. “Nice thinking, then!” I flashed a thumbs-up.

I didn’t know how many Zanaffars were out there in total, but that was one down! I was hoping we could take the rest of them out the same way, although I was skeptical we’d be that fortunate. Cyclops had probably been watching the whole fight with his drones, which meant our next move should be...

“Incoming!” Gourry bellowed before I could decide. I followed his gaze and spotted a figure coming out of the mist nearby. The sound of Centaur’s unfortunate fall—er, his tragic defeat in combat, let’s call it—had brought one of his buddies running! I would’ve loved to greet the new arrival with a spell,

but the whole magic-doesn't-work-on-these-guys thing made me rethink my go-to plan.

What emerged from the fog looked like a walking suit of heavy armor. Its arms were thick and its waist was broad, with its head almost entirely subsumed by its breastplate. It was also totally covered in spikes. It wasn't carrying a shield or a weapon, but if you were gonna make armor for an ogre, that's probably what it would look like.

It had to be a Zanaffar, of course. It was gray all over with four tentacles protruding from its back, each terminating in a ruby-like object that I could only assume served as a firing port for laser breath.

This new Zanaffar—Heavy Armor—could apparently make out our silhouettes in the fog. It made a beeline toward us until...

"What?!" Crying out in shock, Heavy Armor stopped short. I couldn't see what had caught its wearer's attention, but I could imagine it was the remains of the Centaur armor. "Impossible! Cashdial was..."

His shock at the sight of his defeated comrade left him wide open!

"Dark Mist!" Zel unleashed his spell. This baby created enough black mist to fill a simple room. It had no direct offensive capability and although it usually manifested around a target, Zel had summoned his to the side of ours.

The appearance of encroaching blackness when Heavy Armor was already shaken was, psychologically, quite effective. The armor's "eyes" darted that way, then Heavy Armor drew back in fear. He was probably expecting an attack from something hidden in the darkness, but he was in for the opposite. While Heavy Armor was distracted by the black mist, Gourry dashed to get around behind him! But as he closed in...

"Win Blast!"

Whoosh! Heavy Armor burst, and Gourry went flying back with it! More accurately, just before the burst, Gourry leaped back in anticipation. Two lasers struck at his feet as he landed, forcing him back even farther.

"Are you okay?!" called Tessius, whose Horns Zanaffar now appeared from the fog. He must have seen Gourry advancing on Heavy Armor and fired—not at

Gourry, but at Heavy Armor itself. If he'd aimed at Gourry, the big lug stood a chance of slipping past the attack and continuing his charge. But a magical attack centered on Heavy Armor ran no risk of friendly fire and made Gourry think twice about getting too close. Smart thinking, loath as I was to admit that.

But... Tessius had just cast an attack spell. I had to wonder why his Horns armor didn't seem to be open.

"I'm okay! But Cashdial was defeated!" Heavy Armor reported.

"Impossible! An elf of Cashdial's caliber? *While* wearing his Zanaffar?!" Tessius cried in shock.

The guy in the Centaur armor was apparently highly regarded by his comrades. It made me stop to appreciate what Zel had said earlier. We probably would've been in for a nasty fight if we'd tangled with him head-on.

"I... saw it," Cyclops Sagan said as he, too, now emerged from the fog. Surely he'd seen the whole thing go down via the drones that Gourry hadn't destroyed yet. "The moment he found them, they used unspeakable teamwork. Faster than the blink of an eye..." His voice was quavering with fear.

I wouldn't have said it was "unspeakable teamwork" so much as it was dumb luck, but I wasn't about to correct the guy. If his drones only relayed visuals, it would mean he hadn't heard Gourry's grunt of uncertainty at the time. And that being the case...

"We've gone easy on you so far!" Strike when they're shaken, that's my motto! So I got straight to striking! "But if you don't back down fast, we can't promise any more mercy!"

Details of intentionality aside, the fact remained that we'd defeated Centaur without losing a single member of our own party in the process. If the Forest Hounds had been brave enough to come out of hiding because of their Zanaffars, seeing one of those Zanaffars defeated had to be a serious blow to their morale.

Indeed, my threat sent a palpable chill through their group.

But suddenly, Gourry leaped forward! He pushed Alaina to the ground, tumbling with her, just as a laser tore through where she'd been standing. I

turned and saw a gray silhouette suspended in a tree—the Spider Zanaffar!

“Don’t falter!” Lukoria, the guy in the arachnid armor, shouted. “Trust in my Zanaffars! They may have a way to cut through the armor, but I’ll bet that’s all they have! Their spells still won’t work on us!”

Tch! He saw through the bluff! Still, the fact that this Lukoria guy called the armors *his* Zanaffars suggested he was the one who’d made them!

“But...” Lucida of the winged Zanaffar landed next to Spider.

She must have seen the others gathering here and come to rendezvous. That made six of them, which, based on what Zel had told us, meant this was all of the Forest Hounds. I sure hoped it was all of the Zanaffars too.

“They’ve already defeated Cashdial! *Our* Cashdial!” Wings rambled on in panic.

“Remain calm and fight!” Spider bellowed, trying to shout her down. “Just line up and fire a solid wall of laser breath, and we’ll kill them easily!”

Crap! That would be pretty tough to dodge!

“But the trees!” Heavy Armor argued.

Spider brushed him off. “Which would you rather do, damage part of the forest now or turn it over to the humans and watch them abuse it?!”

“...”

“We’re doing this!” Spider ordered.

“Dil Brand!” I incanted the second those words left his mouth! This spell caused the ground between our two parties to swell and rupture! I used the dust cloud it created to... “Run!”

With that, our group made a break for it.

“Don’t let them get away!” Spider shouted after us. I felt an inescapable malice swell up behind me—a whole barrage of laser breath! Using my Dil Brand to set up a smoke screen before they could form ranks prevented them from aiming precisely, but they were bound to hit us sooner or later at this rate.

“Dark Mist!” Zel summoned a black haze behind us to obscure their vision

further. It had the power to cancel out even magic light, though I doubted it would stop laser breath.

Just then... a figure in white appeared in the fog ahead of us!

“Aqua Kaleido!” As the new arrival incanted a spell, the scenery around us briefly warped, then returned to normal. A scream rose up behind us.

Part of me wanted to see exactly what had happened, but I couldn’t take my eyes off the sight in front of me. “*You’re here?!* ”

“I made it!” Amelia Wil Tesla Saillune pronounced with a dashing pose and grin.

In that moment, I saw it.

The city of Atessa, awash with the sounds of battle from outside its walls. Its people, holed up inside their homes, trembling in fear. Knowing we’re out there fighting for them, the soldiers on the guesthouse terrace stare fixedly toward the unseen skirmish. A maid comes running up to them and says... “Princess Amelia has gone missing again!” Then the whole crew faceplants.

I couldn’t help feeling like something along those lines was happening right about now.

After dwelling on that vision for a moment, I pulled myself back to reality. I’d gotten a few inklings so far about how much the princess of Saillune had matured since we’d last traveled together, but it seemed she was still the same old Amelia at heart. I wanted to lecture her about responsibility, except this really wasn’t the time.

I turned around to see what had happened behind us. Scattered through the air over a fairly wide area were endlessly shifting fragments of blue, green, white, and brown. The best way I could describe it would be a kaleidoscope.

The reason the scenery had seemed to warp around us momentarily before was probably because we’d run right through the effect. I just hadn’t had time to work that out before all returned to normal. But now I could see what had been wrought on the other side...

The enemy’s laser breath had punctured Zel’s Dark Mist, dispersing its

darkness. And beyond that, the Forest Hounds all stood around, staring... at the Heavy Armor Zanaffar with a giant hole in its stomach.

“H-How...?” whispered Wings in a daze.

And as if triggered by her words... *Thunk*. Heavy Armor fell to its knees and then collapsed.

“Londium!”

“Hey! Wake up!”

The other Hounds all called out to their comrade. Parts of Wings’s armor briefly opened up and folded back, becoming a lighter set of mail. Its wearer, Lucida, ran up to Heavy Armor and began chanting a spell. Healing magic wouldn’t normally work on someone completely enveloped in a Zanaffar, but given the hole in Heavy Armor’s abdomen...

“What are you doing, Lucida?! Don’t take off your armor!” Spider scolded her.

“We have to withdraw,” Cyclops whispered, his eyes cautiously fixed on us.

“Don’t be a coward!” Spider barked back.

“They just reflected our laser breath!” Cyclops rebuked him.

Wait... “You reflected the laser breath?!” I whispered in disbelief, casting a glance back at Amelia.

“More like I refracted and diffused it!” she proclaimed, still staring down the Forest Hounds.

“Amelia... you can use a spell like that?” I was stunned.

“When we beat that Zanaffar before, I thought about the potential risk of the creation method getting out! Then, after I returned to Saillune, I collaborated with the sorcerers’ council to work out a spell to counter it just in case! It’s an adaptation of a spell that controls wind to create illusions, to which I added in a little water magic to create something capable of refracting and diffusing laser breath!”

She worked out a spell like that?! I couldn’t help being impressed. But then something occurred to me. “Wait a minute, Amelia. How’d you know we were

fighting Zanaffars? We didn't tell anyone in town..."

"You said they fired lasers and were immune to attack spells! What else could they be *but* Zanaffars?!"

Well, girl had a point! Amelia had already fought one Zanaffar with us, so it only stood to reason she'd be able to peg it from that description.

"And since I have a spell that can fight laser breath, I knew I had to help! I wasn't *trying* to reflect it back on them, but it looks like I got lucky with the refraction and diffusion!"

Another bit of dumb luck. Still, for the Forest Hounds, the fact that we'd just taken out two of their Zanaffars so offhandedly must have been a massive blow to morale. I saw no sign of more reinforcements showing up as we squared off either, which told me this was really all of them.

"We have to withdraw, Tessius!" Cyclops urged him again. "We acted too soon! We're just going to see more damage at this rate!"

Selfish as usual, I found myself thinking in disgust. *You get your little Zanaffar toys and get all riled up to attack a city. Then when one of your own gets wounded, suddenly it's gone too far and you want to stop? What are you, a child?!* I would've loved to have given them a piece of my mind, but it wasn't like I *wanted* them to knuckle down and keep fighting, so I decided to keep my mouth shut.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Spider howled. "After all this, you expect me to back off because it's too *risky*?! They burned my face! They violated the forest! They took out Cashdial and Londium! And you want me to just back down? We can do this! And we *will*! We just need the Zanaffars I created!"

"Even without the laser breath?" Cyclops whispered bitterly.

"Lukoria," Tessius said firmly. "It's time to retreat."

"Fine," Spider responded, just as firmly. And then...

Heavy Armor sat up!

"What?!" A shiver ran through Cyclops.

"What the— What?!" Tessius exclaimed in panic.

Lucida, who'd been sitting by Heavy Armor and casting healing spells, suddenly saw her light armor transform, spread its wings, and envelop her. Then as she yelped in surprise, it spat her out onto the ground. She turned back in shock and saw the armor, now masterless, take the form of the winged Zanaffar.

What was that?!

"So be it. I'll fight on my own," Spider declared.

It was then that I put it all together. Although somewhat dissipated now, the white mist was still hanging in the area around us. I hadn't realized it at first because of that, but I could now see that the countless tentacles extending from Spider—which had looked like a web while it was in the trees—had lashed out to grab Heavy Armor, Cyclops, Horns, and Wings.

"What... in the world...?" Lucida spoke tremblingly.

We all watched as the Zanaffars came together, pulled by Spider's tentacles. Only Heavy Armor was released, falling to the ground. Parts of the other four armors opened, allowing them to attach together and merge into a single giant mass. The change happened so suddenly that Tessius and Sagan could do little but cry out in surprise.

Once the amalgamation was complete, the final form... didn't resemble anything in particular. It was about the height of a two-story house. Horns and Cyclops were back to back, with Spider standing atop them forming a twisted sort of head. Some of Spider's legs were clamped down on the Zanaffars below, while others waved wildly in the air. Wings had been split up into several pieces to plant wings of various sizes here and there across the mass.

The collective armor had the characteristics of Spider, Horns, Cyclops, and Wings, but on the whole, it was simply an abomination, lacking any rhyme or reason to its form.

"What are you doing?!" Lucida shrieked.

"Isn't it obvious?" I answered. "Spider there... Lukoria, was it? He's taken control of the Zanaffars." The only reason he'd let go of Heavy Armor was because, regardless of the status of the wearer, the Zanaffar itself was dead and

thus couldn't be integrated.

"He's taken control of them? He can do that?" Lucida whispered in disbelief.

But as far as I was concerned, the answer was obvious. If Lukoria had made the Zanaffars... "He built this capability into them from the start," I explained, "so that he could hijack the others if it came to that." Spider's tentacles weren't really meant for swinging through the trees, but for this.

"That's absurd!" Lucida shrieked.

"'Hijack'? Slander," Lukoria said scornfully. "It's a suppression system I designed on the off chance that a Zanaffar got out of control. Ideally, I'd have given each one the same function so they could all control each other... But the wielder needs to understand the technology to use it, so I didn't implement it in the rest."

"What about Tessius and Sagan? Are they all right?!" Lucida asked.

It was a fair question. They hadn't uttered a peep since their initial cries of surprise when their armors were snatched up. Either their voices couldn't penetrate the armor, or...

"They're fine. Stop worrying, Lucida, and tend to Londium and Cashdial. Meanwhile..."

I got the feeling that the misshapen lump's eyes, wherever they were, had just turned toward us. We sensed the malice rising from the new Abomination armor and readied ourselves for a fight.

"I'll stop them," Amelia declared, immediately moving into a chant.

Just then, a gray afterimage raced through the air! Amelia, Zel, Alaina, and I all leaped in different directions, while Gourry alone stood fast and lashed out with his sword. The wings here and there on Abomination's body had transformed in the blink of an eye, becoming gray spears that fired straight at us. Gourry sliced through them, leaving just the severed spear tips sticking into the ground nearby!

"Oho!" Joy abounded in Lukoria's voice. "That sword's the key, eh?"

Crap! I felt a pang of regret. Centaur's remains had given away the fact that

we had a weapon capable of severing the Zanaffar armor. The purpose of Abomination's attack just now had been to ascertain exactly what that weapon was.

As Lukoria spoke, Gourry dashed forward, intent to strike immediately. The Cyclops part of Abomination raised both its hands—the ports from which it fired its lasers. And just then...

"Aqua Kaleido!" Amelia cast her refraction spell around the extended appendages. There was no way Lukoria could risk firing like this!

Gourry swiftly closed in, and when he did... the abomination armor jumped! With a litheness and agility belied by its round, misshapen form, it leaped clean over Gourry—easily out of sword's reach—and lashed out with its tentacles. They snagged nearby trees, allowing the mass to accelerate further and adjust its posture in midair. It was really heading for Alaina!

While Alaina just stood there, slow to react to the armor's unexpected charge...

"Dug Haute!" Zel conjured spires of earth that struck the flying Abomination. Alaina used the disruption to get some distance.

Though Abomination should have been knocked off course, the mass of armor landed with ease. The awkward giant, which really should have needed a moment to get its bearings, immediately began pursuing Alaina again.

So his top priorities are the sword that can cut it and his fellow elf, while us humans play third fiddle?! Then again, the first time we met, Alaina *had* been the one to bust up Spider's fireball and give Lukoria a good toasting, so maybe the dude was holding a grudge.

But right before Abomination could crush Alaina underfoot... she disappeared from sight!

A spell? No... She'd twined her whip around a nearby tree, speeding up in an all new direction. Abomination paused when it lost visual, and then...

"Earth Sloun!" Alaina conjured an earthen battering ram to send Abomination flying!

More specifically, it never actually made contact with Abomination's main body. The arms and legs of Cyclops, Horns, and Spider moved to block the attacking battering ram, and Abomination flew backward through the air to mitigate the hit. The reflexes involved were almost absurd—Gourry-level, or maybe even greater—and I doubted those reflexes were Lukoria's.

Like humans, elves generally had only two arms and legs. There was no way Lukoria's brain could manage the Abomination, which had double that number, plus spidery tentacles and multiple wings. The same was true of his multi-legged and tentacled arachnid armor before the transformation, which told me that Lukoria left the finer controls of the armor to Zanaffar while he simply issued orders. That meant if we could get Lukoria to hesitate, we might be able to net ourselves an opening... but the Zanaffar's incredible reflexes and athletic abilities wouldn't make that easy.

While Abomination was still in the air, the part that had once been the Cyclops armor opened and shot out multiple projectiles. A hail of gray bullets about the size of songbirds flew at Alaina. *More of the drones Cyclops sent into the fog to locate us?! I'd assumed the things were meant for surveillance and monitoring, but as extensions of a Zanaffar, they were probably plenty tough on their own.* A blow from one of those would be like getting hit by a rock. Plus, Amelia couldn't block them with a spell like she could the laser breath, and our attack magic still wasn't gonna work on them. That being the case...

"Vu Vrima!" I placed my hand on the ground and incanted a different spell!

Abomination, having landed, seemed to be on guard as it scrambled backward. Then, in response to my words of power, the ground between Alaina and the incoming drone swarm swelled. The drones entered the rising cloud of dust, which absorbed them, roiled, and took on a giant humanoid shape large enough to rival Abomination!

In other words, I'd just made myself a golem. It would obey simple commands and it was built sturdy, but it wasn't particularly fast. Obviously it didn't stand a chance against Abomination, but...

"Golem!" I pointed in the direction opposite Atessa and gave my order. "Full speed ahead, thataway!"

The golem responded with an earthy creak and did as it was told. And though it wasn't particularly fast, it *was* at least a little faster than a normal human could run. Behold, my secret technique—the drone snatch-and-dash! Abomination would have to destroy the golem to get them back, and Amelia's spell would block any attempted uses of its laser breath. That meant it'd have to get up close and personal to do the job—leaving it vulnerable to an attack from behind! That was my plan, anyway, but...

“Bam Plosion.”

Fwoom! Following the incantation, an attack spell hit the golem!

Was that...

“Tessius?!” Lucida, who'd been treating her companion, identified the source of the voice.

It had sounded like Tessius to me too, but how could that be? He shouldn't have been able to use magic from within Zanaffar armor... unless it was open, that is. Except earlier, when Gourry had tried to slice through Heavy Armor and Tessius had used an attack spell to drive Gourry back, he'd done so while his armor was seemingly closed. I could only figure that Horns' opening port was designed to be difficult to perceive.

Now, magical logistics aside... Tessius had insisted on retreat earlier. Was he really cooperating all of a sudden with Lukoria, who'd ignored him and sucked him into the mega-Zanaffar against his will? Or... was Lukoria controlling Tessius through the Zanaffar, forcing him to chant spells?! Either way, we were now going to have to factor surprise spells into our battle plans.

My blown-away golem fell to the ground in chunks. The spy drones briefly stored inside flew out and resumed their attack on Alaina. But by then, Gourry was back in the game and broke out the swordplay! There was a flash, then a second, third, fourth... With each swing of his blade, a drone fell to the ground, cleaved in two.

In response, from some ways away, Abomination raised its hands and took a stance. Was it going to use its laser breath despite the risks?!

Amelia immediately began her spell... She was about to activate it, but

hesitated.

Of course. This is... “Dodge!” I shouted.

Gourry and Alaina leaped aside, barely evading the torrent of drones. Seeing this, Abomination lowered its hand and eased up on its stance.

Damn, this is tricky. Abomination was threatening a twin attack with its laser breath and drones. If Amelia didn’t use her refraction spell to defend, we’d have to dodge the laser breath. But if she did use it, Gourry would end up blinded to the path of the incoming drones.

Abomination recalled the drone swarm to set up the same attack again, when...

“Vigas Gaia!” Zel unleashed a spell that caused tremors in the ground. It wasn’t going to harm Abomination, but it *would* throw it off balance. Thanks to that, we were spared another drone-laser double whammy, but the longer this fight kept up, the worse off we’d be. Therefore...

“Everyone! Let’s withdraw for now!” I called, and everyone—with Amelia just a beat behind—took off in a run. But not toward town.

“You think you can escape me?!” Abomination howled. Then, right in front of him...

“Aqua Kaleido!”

Amelia’s refraction spell coalesced! The fastest way to get out of it was simply to charge through it, but Abomination seemed worried about the possibility of an ambush waiting on the other side of the distortion, so he balked and took the long way around.

Alaina took the lead as she incanted, “Foggul!” More flame-dampening mist swirled around us.

Immediately after came Tessius’s voice—“Airplosion!” *Whoom!* There was a sudden burst in the air. The shockwave it produced rolled over us, but it didn’t hurt. That spell wasn’t an attack so much as it was an attempt to clear the air and find us. It accordingly thinned the mist, although not enough to unobscure our vision entirely.

Our foe was on high alert for attacks from Gourry through the fog, but he couldn't afford to lose sight of us. After all, Abomination—or rather Spider Lukoria—had forcibly merged with Cyclops, Horns, and Wings. He couldn't possibly remain active for long like that, and he'd surely have to eat or shit eventually. He'd have to take off the armor at some point or other. Once he did and Tessius and Sagan were freed, the only remotely passable excuse for his behavior would be if he'd successfully finished us off before then. If all he had to say for himself was “Teehee, they got away! Sorry...” Yeah, his friends would have his head on a platter.

Meanwhile, victory for us meant more than just shaking Lukoria off our tail. If we ditched him, he'd feel compelled to attack Atessa instead to make this all worth his while. In other words, we had to defeat him.

My call to withdraw before had actually been the signal to enact a little strategy we'd arranged ahead of time. I'd discussed it with everyone except Amelia, who hadn't been with us when we'd cooked it up, but she seemed to twig it nonetheless.

The swarm attacks from Cyclops's drones had ceased. Our opponent was focused on tracking us so as to keep us on his radar. We kept running, occasionally firing a blast behind us or renewing the smoke screen spell. And then...

“Everyone! Listen up!” I began to lay out the plan in a voice low enough that our pursuer, Lukoria, couldn't hear.

Atessa, city of blacksmiths, was fueled by the Celcelas Forest, but its people had long abided by a pact of sowing a new tree for every one they cut down. Anyone who ignored this had to pay a fine. But wherever you have rules, you always have rulebreakers too.

I didn't know the exact story behind it, but tucked away some distance from the city, there was an area where trees had been harvested without being replanted, resulting in a wide-open clearing. This was where we'd lured Abomination.

We'd had to run quite a ways to get here, but thanks to Alaina repeatedly

casting her dampening mist, we'd been able to stay shrouded the whole way. Abomination had fired off a few attack spells en route, but perhaps thanks to the thick tree cover, we'd luckily avoided taking any direct hits. Gourry had struck out with his sword here and there too, probably responding to drones or incoming astral attacks.

"Alaina!"

Nodding slightly in response to my signal, Alaina threw a knife with a topaz on its hilt. It stuck deep into a nearby rotten stump. She gave another small nod... and we were ready to roll!

"Zel! Amelia!" At my call, my old traveling companions began to chant in accordance with the plan we'd gone over.

Then our group split up in four directions. When we did... Abomination appeared, barreling through the fog around us!

In that instant, Zel and Amelia unleashed their spells! "Freeze Arrow!"

Close to a hundred frigid bolts flew at Abomination! It dipped to the side with unthinkable speed, but the volley was too great and too dense to escape entirely. About a dozen arrows hit Abomination directly, and these puppies were designed to freeze anything they hit! They'd encase whatever they struck with a thin coating of ice that caused frostbite and hindered movement. The hitch was that we were dealing with a Zanaffar. The worst they could do was cause a cold chill... But the counter-hitch was that that was all we needed right now!

I took some distance from our opponent and incanted, "Sight Frang!"

Bwoosh! Responding to my words of power, a thick mist expanded so rapidly that you could hear it. This was different from the extinguishing spell Alaina used in that it simply summoned a mist without any special properties.

"A smoke screen?!" Lukoria hissed, and then...

"Algwin." *Vwoosh!* Tessius's voice boomed and a powerful wind picked up. I just managed to keep my footing to avoid being blown away.

The gust was probably to clear the mist and improve visibility. As intended,

the mist thinned, but Alaina's white fog remained. She then cast a spell like a winter storm—"Crystal Blizzard."

Zel followed her lead, targeting Abomination again. "Freeze Arrow!"

"You really think you can freeze me over?!" Lukoria's mocking voice echoed. "Or do you think you can freeze the person inside the armor? Go ahead and try!"

Vwoosh! Another cleansing blast of wind blew, and I conjured more mist to make up for it.

"Enough!" Abomination howled as Amelia blasted it with yet more frigid magic. "Why... you...!"

Tessius's monotone voice incanted, "Valtrain," and there came a flash of light that, for an instant, permeated the misty world around us.

Is this... an indiscriminate area-of-effect lightning spell?! Dozens of tendrils of electricity coursed through the fog, scorching the ground from heaven above. I fortunately escaped being struck despite standing in the spell's massive range, but given its ferocity, it was optimistic to think the rest of my party had been so lucky! I wanted to make sure everyone was okay, but...

Even though it had slowed down, I could still see Abomination moving through the fog. "Damn this infernal mist..." Lukoria cursed, and that told me it was showtime.

"Zel! Amelia! Now!" I shouted.

"Vu Vrima!" they incanted in unison. Instantly, buds of earth blossomed all around us. The ground surrounding Abomination yawned open. This was the same golem-making spell I'd used before. Zel and Amelia had summoned golems on either side of Abomination, swallowing it up as they took shape.

"What in the world?!" The reason for Lukoria's shock was obvious: The golems rising out of the ground were massive! Abomination could have easily broken out of the golem I'd summoned before, but these were almost double its size. The roiling earth seized Abomination's legs and waist as it continued to swell upward.

Lukoria must not have realized it, but we were within the giant magic amplification circle that Alaina had created.

To be more exact, a few days prior, we'd secretly set up a few not-quite-complete magic circles close to town. The finishing touch? The topaz on the knife that Alaina had thrown earlier. The circle we were in now was as large as a few city blocks, and these babies boosted magic in direct proportion to their size.

If Lukoria hadn't been severed from the astral plane by his Zanaffar, he would have been able to "see" the circle. They'd probably supercharged Tessius's lightning spell too, but even if Tessius had "seen" the circle when he'd opened up the armor to cast, he probably hadn't had the wherewithal to communicate that while he was being controlled.

And after all that, Lukoria's next move was...

"Don't underestimate me!" He let out a howl and fired several beams of light at the not-yet-fully-formed golems.

Laser breath! The incomplete golems took damage enough to interrupt their formation. But then...

"Noct Coffin!" Alaina's cold spell hit the golems that had come to encompass Abomination like a great earthen flower. The moisture in the ground froze solid, trapping Abomination in a sturdy cage!

"Gourry! Alaina!" I called.

"Right!"

"Right here!"

Both responses came from close by.

So everyone's safe after all! Lukoria must have drawn a really bad hand with those lightning strikes. Or perhaps Tessius had resisted a little, reducing their accuracy.

The three of us reunited. Alaina took Gourry's hand with her right and mine with her left. "Lei Wing!"

Lei Wing was a high-speed flight spell I used a fair bit myself. It was hard to

control and was easy to max out weight-wise, but with elven magic power and the amplification field, Alaina could easily carry us all! From above, we could see Cyclops and Horns buried up to their necks in the half-formed golems, making Abomination look like a spider stuck at the bottom of a crater. As we approached said spider, I began my incantation!

Blade forged of the freezing black void,

Be released under heaven's seal

I was working on a spell that conjured a blade of darkness—one that I couldn't use without the magic amplification afforded me by Alaina's circle. It was powerful beyond a doubt, but it also drained my magic power like nobody's business. I figured I'd be able to cast it here, but I had no idea how long I could keep it up once I invoked it.

Abomination noticed our approach and turned its lone free leg toward me...

"Stay on track!" Gourry cried. Alaina kept charging forward without bothering to dodge! The laser breath Abomination fired from its leg just brushed the wind barrier around us!

All right! Just as I hoped, he can't see us very well right now! We'd showered the Zanaffar with icy attacks knowing that, even if they didn't damage it, they would greatly reduce its surface temperature. Moving around the fog like that had collected condensation across the armor—including the surface of Spider's eyes. Lukoria had only perceived it as the fog growing thicker, and his compromised vision reduced his accuracy.



The spidery leg shifted, taking aim again...

“Drop him!” On my order, Alaina shoved Gourry outside of the wind barrier! Instinctively, Alaina and I moved back slightly to counterbalance.

A blast of laser breath scorched the air between us and Gourry! He continued to plummet, landing atop one of the frozen half-formed golems. Then he took off running!

Meanwhile, I also let go of Alaina’s hand and landed on the second golem flanking Abomination. I ran toward the Spider portion, still chanting my spell.

Become mine, become part of me

Let us mete destruction as one

Smash even the souls of the gods...

Abomination looked like it was preparing to attack Gourry. Its tentacles writhed and its wings changed shape, turning to whips and blades that lashed out at the blond swordsman. And if that wasn’t challenge enough, the ground he was trying to cover was shaped like a giant mortar oven, a wannabe golem frozen in a randomized form. Traversing it had to be like running up an uncharted mountain face...

Despite that, Gourry darted toward Spider as easily as if he was bounding through an empty field! If he landed this blow, it would all be over! He sliced through the tentacle whips and wing spears, and then... a drone flying out from behind a cleaved wing charged at him!

“Geh!” He just barely cut through the drone on his backswing, but the forward momentum of its charge kept it going and—*Crash!*—its remains hit Gourry right in the breastplate! “Wuh?!”

Knocked backward on unstable footing, Gourry lost his balance and found himself falling off the oven-golem! While this was unfolding, Abomination turned its wings in my direction for another attack!

Darn it... I’d been hoping Lukoria would dismiss me as a mere human sorcerer or whatever, but apparently that was too much to ask for! While I was charging, obviously, I was also on my guard. I wasn’t sure I was agile enough to dodge the

wings' attacks on this unsteady terrain. *Welp... Guess this is it!*

"Ragna Blade!" I spoke the words of power, and a dark blade the length of a shortsword appeared in my hands. I'd managed to cast the spell, but I could tell it was draining my magic awfully fast.

The Ragna Blade spell borrowed power from the Lord of Nightmares, written of in the legendary Claire Bible. I was using the imperfect version at the moment. The real deal was much more powerful, but it didn't increase the weapon's reach at all and it ate up my magic and stamina that much faster. So since I was more about duration than strength right now, the imperfect version was a-okay with me!

With one swing of this weightless blade of darkness, I cut right through a transformed wing. But in doing so, I instantly earned Abomination's full attention. More transformed wings and tentacles lashed out in my direction, and Spider's free leg turned to take aim at me!

Not good!

But just then, Gourry flew in! It took me a second to realize that Alaina had caught the falling lunkhead with her high-speed flight spell and given him a lift. Abomination only hesitated for a moment, but that was all my man needed! Gourry's right hand swept through the air!

Did Lukoria realize he'd thrown the sword at him? Whether he did or not, Zanaffar's reflexes responded and the armor took a defensive stance with its legs, wings, and tentacles.

But none of that mattered. Alaina's magic circle amplified all magic power within it, which in turn increased the Blast Sword's sharpness...

Without a sound, the blade pierced legs, wings, and tentacles alike before plunging straight into Spider's core, right down to the hilt.

Silently, so very silently, Abomination came to a halt. Spider's legs drooped, then went limp, flopping to the ground. Lukoria was likely dead before he realized what had happened.

Gourry effortlessly retrieved the deeply buried sword. The armor's legs trembled slightly. Was one of the Zanaffars still stirring?

Gourry and I prepared for the fight, but...

“Lukoria?” The voice came from Cyclops. Spider must have lost control of it, allowing Sagan to speak again. He didn’t quite seem aware of what had transpired.

“He’s gone now,” Gourry said.

After a brief silence... “I see,” Sagan whispered, seeming to intuit his meaning.

“You still want to fight?” Gourry asked lightly.

“No,” Sagan replied quietly. “We lost. We’ll surrender the Zanaffars.”

And so the fight came to an end.

The light had left Tessius’s eyes. He was alive, but he didn’t respond to any of our calls.

Following Sagan’s admission of defeat, we’d destroyed the Wings Zanaffar and shattered the frozen earth that held Abomination—rather, that held Cyclops and Horns. Once Cyclops was free, Sagan had removed his Zanaffar. It was my first time seeing him up close without his armor, and he appeared to be, in human terms, a good-looking thirtysomething of average height. Maybe even a little on the muscular side as elves went.

But Horns had lain perfectly still after we freed it from Abomination. Sagan called to Tessius within, but after getting no response, he somehow managed to free his comrade from his Zanaffar. Yet even after being released, Tessius remained unresponsive.

“Why?!” Sagan whispered.

I replied, “Tessius was casting spells in our fight just now. If the Zanaffar was forcing him to do that, it might have had some effect on his mind. Just speculation, of course, but...”

“Damnation.” Sagan cursed. “Why? How could this happen? We were just trying to protect the forest.”

“You know...” I said wearily before letting out a sigh. “You really don’t know how this happened? It’s because your way of going about it all was totally

wrongheaded.”

“What?!”

“Protecting the forest? Noble goal. So to do it, you get these powerful weapons known as Zanaffars and attack a human settlement in the forest. Then, when the humans threaten to burn the forest in retaliation, you decide to keep fighting in the forest to kill them. Then one of you decides to sacrifice some of you so you can *keep fighting in the forest*. What the hell did you think you were protecting? It wasn’t the forest, and it certainly wasn’t your friends. In fact, I’d say you got every part of this wrong. What were you even protecting the forest *for*?”

Sagan spoke up haltingly in response. “Elves have a special connection to the woods—”

“And humans’ll never understand, right? Not what I mean. Living beings are fundamentally simple. Elf, human, or animal, we’re all just trying to find as much happiness as we can. From that point of view, your manifesto about protecting the forest amounts to ‘I’m not happy seeing people ruin the forest. I want to stop them so *I* can be happy again.’ In other words, this was all a means to an end. But what was the price? How far would you have to go to get what you wanted? And could you really do it? You didn’t think about any of that, so you ended up on the path to a future where there was no winning. Even if you’d defeated us, you wouldn’t have ended up happy. That’s what I think,” I declared.

Sagan went quiet for a while. “Then what were we supposed to do?” he eventually asked in response.

“How should I know?”

“That was fast!” Alaina threw in for some reason (still speaking through the Regulus Discs).

“Well, what do you expect? No one can tell you what’s going to make you happy or how you should go about getting there. You have to ask yourself what’s really important to you, then keep thinking about how best to live your life without losing sight of it. There isn’t one fixed answer. That’s all any of us can do. Though, obviously, it’s easier said than done.”

I wasn't sure if he accepted my words or not, but Sagan simply sighed and fell silent. He seemed to regret what he'd done, but I wasn't sure he really felt *sorry* for it, exactly. Either way, though, I had to get the Hounds to repay Atessa for everything they'd done to it.

But just then... "Crack Wall!" We felt a presence and heard a voice and leaped back!

Krakabwoobwoobwoosh! Next came a series of small explosions. The whole area filled with thick smoke.

"Sagan! Let's withdraw!" The voice that called out belonged to the female elf who'd worn the Wings armor, Lucida! Her spell seemed like nothing more than a loud distraction and smoke screen, but it kept us from getting our bearings.

Sagan had already surrendered, so I wasn't sure he'd put up a fight if we gave chase. But Lucida, who didn't know exactly what had just gone down, was a different story.

I readied a spell. "Diem Wind!"

But by the time I set my magical gust loose, Sagan and Tessius were already gone. All they'd left behind were two suits of light armor, the Cyclops and Horns Zanaffars, as if to say they were giving them up. Without a word, Gourry walked over to them, swung his sword... and with that, the last of the Zanaffars were destroyed.

"Should we chase down the Hounds?" Zel asked.

"No," Alaina replied. "I'll take over from here. It would be difficult for humans to pursue elves seriously attempting to flee through the forest. I'll return to our village, explain things there, and rustle up a search force. I'll see that they atone for their crimes against Atessa. But all that aside..." She looked around questioningly, then turned to me. "Is there... another of you here?"

That was an odd question, and yet...

"Yeah, there is." The immediate answer came from Gourry, of all people. Me, Zel, and Amelia turned to him quizzically as he called out, "You're there, right? Might as well show yourself, Xellos!"

“Erk?!” we all shouted in shock.

“Oh, you noticed me?” I heard his voice as a presence abruptly appeared behind me.

I jumped, whipping around. “Xellos?!”

Black hair and vestments. A mild expression punctuated by a bright smile. At a glance, he seemed your typical easygoing priest... but your typical easygoing priest didn’t pop up out of nowhere like that.

“You’ve been here the whole time?!” I cried.

“Yes. The whole time,” he responded flippantly.

Alaina collapsed to the ground. “Lina! L-L-Lina! That man...” she said hoarsely, quivering.

“Er...” I hesitated for a moment, then decided to be honest. “Yeah, he’s a demon acquaintance of ours.”

“What?!” Alaina’s voice cracked.

To be fair, freaking out was a normal reaction. We’d met Xellos during the previous Zanaffar incident and he’d traveled with us for a time, but despite appearances, he was a hella high-ranking demon. During the Incarnation War a thousand years ago, it was said that Xellos, Priest of Greater Beast Zellas Metallium, had destroyed an entire army of dragons all by himself. If Alaina could “see” Xellos’s true astral form, I perfectly understood her panic.

But Xellos smiled at Alaina and said, “No need to worry. I have no intention of making any trouble.”

“Eek!” Alaina scrambled backward and cowered behind my legs. “A stranger talked to me...”

Wait, it’s just the social anxiety?! I’d assumed she was afraid because Xellos was a high-ranking demon, but... Of course that’s all it was.

“I assume you’re here for the Zanaffars, then?” Zelgadis asked.

“Brilliantly deduced,” Xellos confirmed with a nod. “As you may already know, my standing order is to destroy Claire Bible manuscripts... but it seems

knowledge leaked from that last one managed to reach the Forest Hounds. I was at quite a loss. Multiple elves controlling Zanaffars... it seemed rather troublesome to deal with myself. Should I tag on a little overtime to take care of it personally, or pretend I never saw it and accept the scolding later? While I was weighing these two options, a set of familiar faces just happened to appear, so I thought, why not take advantage of them? Though I did help you out in secret a time or two.”

Well, just come right out and say you took advantage of us, why don't you?! “Your work ethic leaves a lot to be desired, y’know?” I muttered in vague disgust.

Xellos raised a scolding finger at me. “I prefer to say I’m efficient and logical. Or perhaps...” He glanced over at Amelia. “As Miss Amelia here might say, I rose up to save my old allies in their hour of need!”

In response to this obviously sarcastic comment, Amelia cooed, “Oh, how thrilling!” Eyes sparkling, she excitedly clenched her fists. “You couldn’t help but aid the imperiled friends alongside whom you’d once fought! Despite your protestations to the contrary, your heart truly does burn with justice! So to assist your former allies, you transcended your nature as a demon and—”

“Please no I take it all back I was being entirely facetious!” Xellos raved, waving his hands hastily. Once again, he’d underestimated Amelia’s zeal for all things righteous. “B-But I *am* impressed that you noticed me, Master Gourry.”

Ah, the good ol’ change-the-subject strategy...

“Well, y’know,” Gourry said, scratching his head. “While I was fighting, that thing that would pull my sword around... What’s it called again? The astrid plane? Those attack thingies disappeared at random a few times. I don’t know a lot of guys who could do something like that.”

“That explains that,” I said, finally catching on. “I’d been thinking our luck was a little *too* good. So you were helping out behind the scenes, huh? There was the nullification of astral attacks that Gourry mentioned, the dumb luck we had when Centaur attacked, the way that Amelia’s refraction spell just so happened to ricochet right through Heavy Armor, the fact that massive lightning spell managed to miss all of us...”

Upon hearing my speculation, Xellos scratched at his cheek bashfully. “Well... I was involved in most of that, but not the Centaur incident. That *was* purely dumb luck.”



“So it was just an accident...”

“It sure was, wasn’t it?”

“Well, such things do happen, I suppose.”

“I hope whoever was inside lives a long life after this! Though I didn’t see it, so I have no idea!”

“How absurd... Er, ahem!”

Awkward comments came from all assembled.

“Well, I’m happy that all the Zanaffars were destroyed and the person with knowledge from the manuscript is dead. And you must be happy that you purged the threat to the city. It’s win-win, wouldn’t you agree?” Xellos said casually.

“Is it possible...” I began to ask as the thought dawned on me. “Xellos, were you also responsible for Gourry’s final sword throw hitting Spider dead-on? To dispose of Lukoria, the only elf with the knowledge from the Claire Bible...”

At this, Xellos simply wagged his finger at me. “That’s... a secret.”

Ahh. Figured he’d say that. I couldn’t help but feel a little manipulated, of course.

He gave one last look over our group and said, “As I have no business with the remaining elves, I’ll leave them to you. But now that I’ve paid my respects, I really must be going.”

And with that, he vanished.

The wind blew, dispersing the last of the mist and smoke lingering on the battlefield. The green leaves of the forest trees rustled in the breeze.

And so, peace returned to Atessa... Or did it? As long as the city of blacksmiths remained, there would be elves who objected to its presence. Still, it was clear the Forest Hounds had abandoned their cause for now, as evidenced by the way they abandoned their Zanaffars.

We returned to the places where Centaur and Heavy Armor had been

defeated and found the shells of their armor, but no bodies. I didn't know exactly what had happened to their wearers. Plus, Xellos had said "all the Zanaffars" were destroyed, so I doubted there were any more lying in wait for us.

The threat, for now, had passed.

Amelia and her envoy departed Atessa two days after our final fight with the Forest Hounds. The reason for the delay was to prove to the mayor and her bodyguards that she was still hale and hearty.

Currently, there was quite a crowd at the gate just outside of town formed to watch the departure of the Saillune retinue. There were a few local security guys, the town bigwigs, and us, not to mention regularly stationed soldiers of Zephilia and your standard gaggle of lookie-loos. Alaina alone was absent, as she'd skipped town the day before. She'd told MacLyle (and none of the rest of us) that she'd form a party with her comrades and return with the conspirators in hand, then left.

I can't deny that sneaking out because she couldn't handle a proper sendoff *did* seem like a very Alaina thing to do, but Amelia was quite disappointed. She'd wanted to talk to the elf—apparently to learn how to use whips to travel quickly up to high places, so this was probably for the best.

Amelia stepped down from her carriage to speak to a few of the people in the crowd. She offered a handful of parting remarks to the mayor out of courtesy, and then she turned to me. "Are you sure you guys won't come with us?" she asked.

It was true we were going to the same place, but... I shrugged. "Better not. You'll probably be dealing with a lot of important people where you're going, and your bodyguards will have to worry about us if we tag along. I'd rather take it easy, leave the door open for detours when I feel like it."

"I understand. And you, Master Zelgadis?"

"I'm going to remain here a bit longer," Zel replied. "Even if I did have my reasons, I was initially conspiring with the Hounds to damage the city. I think I need to make amends."

The scars from the attack were still visible on Atessa, so I was sure the help would be appreciated. I'd heard from the mayor that soldiers were already on the way by the time they contacted the capital of Zephilia to let them know things had been resolved, so they'd be reassigned to help with rebuilding and repairs. Maybe it wouldn't take too long after all.

"Very well. I hope we'll meet again somewhere, someday," said Amelia.

"Same here," I replied.

"See you then," Gourry offered.

"Hopefully under less onerous circumstances," Zel chimed in.

"Now then, thank you for all your help. Farewell, everyone." Amelia curtsied to us, then boarded her carriage.

The soldiers of Saillune straightened up and the carriage began to move again.

"See you!"

"Don't justice too hard now, you hear?"

"And be mindful of heights!"

As we saw her off with various goodbyes, her procession made its way down the road. Once it disappeared beyond the trees, the gathered bigwigs, soldiers, and sightseers began streaming back to the city.

"Welp..." I looked to Zel, MacLyle, and Randa in turn. "I guess we'd better be going too."

Gourry and I had already made preparations to depart as well. MacLyle had even paid us our service fee with a sweet bonus on top.

"You were such a help. Thank you for everything," he said.

From beside MacLyle, Randa said, "'Preciate all the help. You told me to make up for my failures by acting... but I didn't get to do anything in the end." There was a tone of self-recrimination in his voice.

I responded with a grin. "Oh, come on. I never said it had to be in the fight with the Forest Hounds, did I? Just make up for it with little actions for the city

from now on.”

“That’s right. Don’t overstep your bounds, and just do what you can, bit by bit,” MacLyle added with a smile. “Like forgoing rest and working only for a single loaf of stale bread or something.”

“Spare him that. Please,” I was forced to say. MacLyle’s words had a ring of truth beyond the obvious joke.

“Well, take care, Zel.”

“Yeah. You guys too. And Gourry, please don’t forget my name.”

“You got it! I’ll at least remember it for a month or so!”

With that, Gourry and I set off and left the city of Atessa behind.

Afterword

Scene: Author (Hajime Kanzaka) and L

L: I told you! As long as that chuni soul lives inside people's hearts, *Slayers* will always return!

Au: You did say that! In the afterword of the anthology!

L: Humanity and chuni soul are inscrutable things! Even if the "past life" and "special ability" strains die out and it mutates, the chuni disease itself prevails!

Au: Well, I'm not sure that's what we should be talking about here... But it really has been a while, huh, everyone? This was the special *Slayers* volume, "A Chance Encounter in Atesa"!

L: A special volume, huh? Isn't it just volume 16?

Au: Well, I *meant* it to be a special volume to show gratitude to our longstanding supporters for the thirtieth anniversary of Fantasia Bunko and *Dragon Magazine*, but... we realized it would be kind of weird if you read it out of context, so chronology-wise, we decided it really had to be volume 16.

L: It definitely has a "class reunion" feel. And you titled it "A Chance Encounter."

Au: I wanted it to feel like a chance encounter on the street between the old fans and the *Slayers* story.

L: Do you know if you'll keep going with it after this?

Au: Frankly, it depends on the reaction to it and the author's feelings and momentum and whether or not there's a good video game out at the time and the weather!

L: Those are some very soft standards!

Au: You bet they're soft! Like pancakes with tons of merengue! There's been no moment in my life I haven't lived soft!

L: Blegh! Hearing an old man describe his life like a pancake kind of ticks me off!

Au: You say that, but there're some nice things that have that old man softness to them.

L: That old man softness? Hmm... Oh! Like pilling on a sweater that hasn't been cleaned!

Au: I guess that *is* old-man-like... Anyway, I really am serious about the weather part. I feel like we've had nothing but major hurricanes for the last thirty-five years. I've been ordered to take walks for my health, but I really need fewer consecutive days when I'll die if I go outside due to what's going on in the environment.

L: Ah. That's right, Author, you take the train to a place with underground malls and walk around there. But the trains don't run during hurricanes.

Au: I always find myself making excuses not to walk at night, or I'll walk during the day when it's not too hot, but... when the walk is over, I get that "whew, that was a full day's work" feeling.

L: But you didn't work! Not even a little bit!

Au: Well, obviously.

L: So get to work! One page every day!

Au: Don't be ridiculous! Maybe faster writers than me can write at that pace, but I'm the same age as Namihei Is*n*!

L: Don't be silly! Namihei-san put together millions of deals by doing a little each day!

Au: That's way too much! Of course, he can afford a single-family home in Setagaya, so maybe he *does* do that much...

L: And so can you.

Au: Have mercy! That said, I do hope to do more. With any luck, the weather will calm down again.

L: Yeah, just be grateful that the temperature differentials aren't as bad as the

surface of the moon. Anyway, I hope you all take care! Look forward to seeing you again!

Afterword: Over



I didn't really have
anywhere special to be.
I'd just seen more than my share
at this point, so I'd decided to
return with Gourry to Zephyr City,
capital of the Kingdom
of Zephilia.

Slayers 16

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER IN ATESSA



Thou who art darker than twilight
Thou who art redder than lifeblood
I swear in thy exalted name
Obscured, deep in the flow of time...

I was chanting a spell
of indiscriminate
destruction!

And make this pledge to darkness here:
So all those in equal measure—
Fools that they are to block our path—
Shall face destruction unconstrained
Grant me power, and unleash thine!

“Dragon Slave!”

We couldn't win by shaking him off our trail either. We had to defeat him.
"Everyone! Listen up!"
I called, and began to lay out the plan...



Bonus Translator/Editor Chat!

[Meg/ED]

So... we last left off with the once-finale, huh? As the author mentions in the afterword this time, volume 16 was originally written as sort of a stand-alone quite some time later, so it's a bit of a fun romp-slash-throwback story.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, it's definitely here to give you all the nostalgia, although this being Kanzaka, he can't quite be satisfied with being completely straightforward in that regard.

[Meg/ED]

Nope, this is far from a victory lap. In fact, the central plot is cleaning up loose ends from over ten volumes ago!

[Liz/TL]

Going back to the Zanaffar from the first arc, with what we know about the Zenafa Armor from the second arc, was a clever way of tying the two arcs together. Like, he sets up elves with transforming armor, so your immediate assumption is that it'll be a bad guy redux of Mephy. That's scary enough! But the reveal is that these guys have no idea what Mephy's village is up to; they bought *Zanaffars* from the Shabranigdu cult.

Then, when you hear that, your first assumption is "oh hell, they're all gonna turn into berserker monsters." But that's not the case either! The elves have fixed that flaw. So it's sort of a double fake out, and a nice expansion on the setting—and like with the demon fusion stories, it shows Kanzaka's dedication to the idea that the world doesn't just throw out tech or ideas just because they got foiled once.

[Meg/ED]

The idea of a villain Mephy or anything approximate to that is utterly terrifying, so the double fake out is pretty incredible. And it really is an interesting peek into the world to see how another group of elves managed to 1) get their hands on the technology and 2) figure out how to make it work for them. It was fun to go back and think about how this has been in motion since volume 5, not to mention everything else that's been unfolding outside of our field of vision. Even though this is functionally a one-off story, it fills in a lot of blanks for us...

Including what two of our favorite pals have been up to! I mean, we hypothetically knew as much as Lina did about what Zel and Amelia have been doing. She presumed they were both still continuing their personal quests, and as it turns out, she pretty much hit the nail on the head! But actually getting to see them (namely, that they're still alive and well) is so, so gratifying. It's like running into old friends, which I suppose is how the volume got its subtitle!

Amelia is an especially warm and fuzzy case since it's evident how much she's grown in the time since we've seen her. Lina remarks on this a handful of times, noting her cool new spell and the simple fact that she's not scaling buildings anymore to yell at bad guys. Zel is arguably more... wistful since he hasn't made, well, tangible progress in regaining his humanity. This volume is essentially blowing up his best lead at present. But, hey, he's still kicking and hasn't given up yet! He also hasn't lost his edge.

[Liz/TL]

Zelgadis's part in the story is honestly a little tragic when you think about it. He's once again stuck playing the villain in pursuit of a total dead end. And it's not even a new dead end! But it's at least clear that he's not the "Mad Swordsman" anymore, as he's doing his best to mitigate the harm caused by the group he's thrown in with.

[Meg/ED]

That's true! He also speaks to some of the big-ticket themes we've been working with lately toward the end when he tells us he's going to stay in town and make right for everything that he's done, even though it was all in pursuit of a not-evil goal.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, that sense of taking it one day at a time. Which we also get with Randa. Poor, naive Randa.

[Meg/ED]

My man... We've seen some volume-specific side characters get done dirty, but this guy practically does it to himself. You spend the whole volume going, "He can't be *that* dumb... can he?" And the answer every time is yes. Yes, he can. Hard not to feel for the dude.

[Liz/TL]

The lack of a twist there is almost what's shocking. He's just a completely guileless ordinary guy, making the kinds of decisions you'd expect a guileless ordinary guy to make. On the other hand, he doesn't die, which I guess is how we know this is a fluffy fanservice story (kidding!)... That said, I was pretty surprised by some of the gruesome fates of the Forest Hounds elves.

[Meg/ED]

There's a lot of "it gets worse the more you think about it" re: the fates of the Forest Hounds. I have to say, though, I thoroughly enjoyed Lina chewing out Sagan in the end. Nice to see her back in top form after being so rattled for a couple of volumes! (But don't get me wrong! I like pensive Lina too.)

[Liz/TL]

As a general life philosophy, "don't get so caught up in anger that you lose sight of your actual goal, which is restoring lost happiness" is probably a pretty

good one. But there's some interesting moral grayness dangled here and there in the volume—the fact that there are people in the city who don't adhere to even the elves' compromise agreement, for instance. It's an aspect that the Forest Hounds don't seem to care about at all (since they reject even a fully-adhered-to compromise) and that the humans sweep under the rug. So it's not really dealt with, because nobody in the story has any motivation to deal with it. But it's still there, even though it didn't have to be, and I'm honestly a little obsessed with that.

[Meg/ED]

Absolutely. I love that the series plots an axis of “selfish” to “selfless” over the typical flat spectrum of good to evil, then goes a step further by suggesting the sweet spot is really somewhere in the middle. *Slayers* never really lets you forget that all of those facets exist, and they're always going to, no matter how *you* chose to govern yourself.

It never comes off as preachy either, since we see it in practice more than we have it explained to us. But I guess that's why I like Lina telling off Sagan so much! It's the closest we ever get to a lecture.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, I think it just goes back to Kanzaka's apparent philosophy of wanting the world to feel large and actually organic. And it's kind of interesting in light of the fact that, although he was writing the original stories mostly back in the 90s and early 2000s, he wrote this one in 2016, where LNs about protagonists *completely fixing all structural inequalities in the entire world* are at their peak.

Not that there's anything wrong with that form of power fantasy, of course, but it makes Lina and the *Slayers* world an even more striking contrast. For all that Lina's been involved in killing or vanquishing god-level beings, she perceives the world and its structures as too big to fix, or just as not a good fit for her power scheme. That's maybe why her lecture to Sagan comes off as pretty in-character.

[Meg/ED]

It's lovely to see Zel and Amelia, and it's fun to see all the callbacks to previous storylines, but I think my favorite thing about this volume was simply seeing that the heart of the series hasn't changed.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah. Kanzaka's still writing his way, and I think we'll see that continuing on in volume 17.

[Meg/ED]

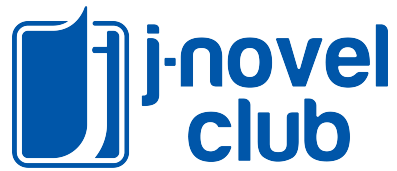
I think I've signed off of the last few volumes on some note of trepidation, but I'm looking forward to the next one. I hear it's time to take a trip?

[Liz/TL]

It is! Although the trepidation now is now entirely mine... As of this writing, volume 17 is the last published volume in the series. It starts off a new arc, and I have *no idea where it's going!*

[Meg/ED]

Wherever it is, we're along for the ride!



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Slayers: Volume 16

by Hajime Kanzaka

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SLAYERS Vol. 16

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